THE HALLEY EFFECT

VULTURE'S TRIANGLE

ANIL KALAY

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To my mother, who filled my childhood with books and stood by me through everything—your love and support mean the world.

And to my grandmother, the strongest woman I have ever known, who fought and defeated COVID at ninety—you are a true warrior.

Preface

The idea of fears transforming into power first came to me in 2013 while I was in university. Yet, it had to wait twelve years to come to life.

The first chapter once appeared in a very different form on a blog, where a handful of readers discovered it. To those who supported me back then—thank you. Your encouragement stayed with me all these years.

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CHAPTER I

LIGHT

Daniel Milner hated having his routines disrupted. Not even today's events had been enough to make him change his plans. In the morning, he had been ready to take a step that would change his life forever—he was going to propose to his girlfriend, Emily. But things hadn't gone as planned. Emily had dumped him.

Now, he stood alone on Lingerwood Hill, looking down at the town's lights from above. After proposing to Emily, he had planned to bring her here for a romantic evening. But an unexpected *small* setback had shattered his plans. That's why he had chosen beer over wine.

He angrily uncorked the wine bottle that had been part of the original plan for the night. Pouring the crimson liquid into the weak fire, he watched as orange flames flared up instantly. This was Emily's favorite wine. Whenever they had something to celebrate, they always chose this one. The scent that had accompanied all their happy moments slowly faded away.

Next, it was time for their photos. Without hesitation, he tossed every memory of their two-year love into the fire. Dozens of photo cartridges melted in the flames, their digital images vanishing in a shower of sparks.

One photo caught his attention. It was the first picture they had taken together after becoming a couple. He looked into Emily's emerald-green eyes one last time. There was always something in them that drew him in. Her long, dark brown wavy hair and messy bangs disappeared into the flames.

His next victims were a scarf and a beanie—birthday gifts Emily had knitted for him with her own hands. He remembered the day he had received them as if it were yesterday. He had been so happy that, in the first few days, he hadn't even taken the beanie off inside the house. His thick, curly hair had become even messier under it, but he hadn't cared in the slightest.

Knowing how adorable Emily thought he looked like that had made him even happier. He was quite tall but had a slender frame; Emily had adored his vulnerable appearance and his slightly clumsy yet endearing posture. Back then, he had felt complete with the gifts Emily had knitted for him.

Now, that same beanie was shrinking in the fire, disappearing into

thick black smoke. It was as if the smoke carried all of his anger and disappointment into the sky.

By the time he finished his third beer, a slight tingling from the alcohol began to creep into his mind. He lifted his head and looked up at the sky. A faint yet dynamic glow caught his attention, drifting gently across the pitch-black canvas, leaving a trail of white light in its wake. From thousands of kilometers above, it seemed to be hypnotizing him.

He felt dizzy where he stood. Staggering a few steps, he barely managed to keep his balance. He hurled the empty bottle in his hand into the fire. The sound of shattering glass blended into the darkness of the night.

Daniel got on his motorcycle to head home. As he pressed the ignition, three-dimensional holographic dials appeared on the handlebars. The radio turned on automatically:

"Tonight, Halley's Comet will complete its 75-year cycle and pass by Earth at its closest point. Last seen with the naked eye in 1986, the comet __"

Daniel pressed the button and silenced the radio. The last thing he cared about right now was an astronomy event. Without hesitation, he set off down the hill.

The stronger the wind hit his face, the more strangely exhilarating it felt. It was as if a great battle was raging across his skin—alcohol trying to take control of him, while the wind struggled to bring him back to his senses. His body swayed on the motorcycle, making him lose balance. The slap of the wind was forcing his mind to clear.

He twisted the throttle all the way. The motorcycle roared as loudly as it could and accelerated faster than ever before. When he glanced at the digital speedometer, his heartbeat quickened. His palms were sweating, making it harder to keep control of the handlebars. He had always been terrified of speeding, but tonight, that fear had given way to reckless courage. He had surrendered completely to the alcohol. The dark, winding road felt like a racetrack designed just for him.

Suddenly, a single headlight appeared in the distance. A sharp, white light had seemingly emerged from nowhere, speeding toward him from the opposite direction. Daniel assumed it was another motorcyclist and moved his hand toward the horn button. He wanted to give a small greeting.

But the approaching light didn't seem like it would settle for a simple greeting. Its speed was terrifying. The brightness grew more blinding by the second. It felt as if this light wasn't coming from a motorcycle—but from an inescapable fate.

With a trembling hand, he pressed the horn in panic. Every muscle

in his body tensed; his shoulders, back, arms, and legs stiffened. He braced himself for the collision. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the light for even a second. The fear of crashing and the blinding intensity of the light blended into one in his mind.

In that moment, it felt as if he was being swallowed by the white light. The motorcycle beneath him seemed to vanish. The dazzling brightness of the headlight had taken over his entire world. Every thought in his mind was erased. His hands slipped from the handlebars, falling limply to his sides. His body became completely unrestrained.

The intense brightness ahead felt like more than just a headlight. He was forced to squeeze his eyes shut. Nothing changed. Even behind his eyelids, he could still see the white glow.

The weight of his legs and body disappeared. It felt as if gravity had been completely erased. His motorcycle was no longer between his legs; he was sure of it. He knew he was being hurled through the air, but he had no sense of direction or speed. He wanted to open his eyes, but the powerful light wouldn't let him.

The white glow slowly began to fade behind his closed eyelids. The deafening sound of his heartbeat faded along with it. A sharp pain surged through his head, as if lightning were striking inside his brain. Then, a deep burning sensation ignited in the center of his chest. He wanted to scream in agony—but he couldn't.

He couldn't even open his mouth. As he sank into the endless darkness, only those two sensations remained with him.

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When Daniel came to, he inhaled the familiar scent of his room. It had been the worst dream he had ever experienced—a combination of every terrible nightmare. Cold sweat dripped down his forehead. But when he cracked his eyes open to check the time, he came face-to-face with the fear that had haunted him for twenty years.

Darkness.

He tried to sit up in bed in a rush. He knew he was in his room, but he couldn't see a thing.

"George! Come here, quick! Please!" he shouted, his voice breaking with panic. His entire body trembled as he sat frozen in bed.

A few seconds later, George opened the door, his greasy, long hair spilling into the room. The moment he realized the room was dark, he reached for the switch by the door and turned it on. As the light flooded the room, his eyes, accustomed to the darkness, squinted from the sudden brightness.

"When did you get home?" he asked, his voice thick with sleep.

Relief washed over Daniel now that he could see his surroundings. He let go of the bedsheet he had been gripping tightly. Only after his fear subsided did his mind fully process George's question.

He had spent the entire evening at home. He hadn't gone out at all. It was the most ridiculous question he had ever heard.

As these thoughts ran through his mind, a sharp pain suddenly struck inside his head, like a bolt of lightning. He squeezed his eyes shut, his face contorting in pain. He could only exhale through a deep, strained groan.

"Daniel, are you okay?" George asked, curiosity lacing his voice. "I've been calling you all evening. You never answered."

The burning pain in Daniel's chest joined the lightning strike inside his head. He could feel every bit of agony from his dream as if it were real. Pressing his hands against his chest, he struggled to catch his breath.

"You disappeared after the proposal. Your phone was off," George said as he stepped into the room.

"It was awful," Daniel muttered, his physical and emotional pain blending together. He hadn't even gotten the chance to propose before Emily had dumped him.

George fixed his curious gaze on Daniel's face, waiting for an explanation. "What happened?" he asked, rubbing his half-sleepy eyes.

"She dumped me."

Their brief conversation was interrupted by a knock at the door. Midnight had already passed. From George's surprised expression, Daniel could tell he wasn't expecting anyone either.

As he wondered who it could be, the lightning bolts striking inside his head forced him to shut his eyes in pain. He let out another strained groan.

George turned the corner at the end of the hallway and disappeared from view to answer the door. Daniel could barely make out his friend's voice. The door opened, and George's startled, tense voice echoed down the hall.

"Who are you?"

The uninvited guest's shadow was nearly twice the size of an average person like George. When Daniel saw the massive man raise a cane, he froze in his bed.

"Watch out!" he tried to shout, but his voice was weak with pain. He attempted to get out of bed, but his body refused to obey.

The shadow on the wall lifted the cane, and a red light flashed. The brightness forced Daniel to squint—it was just as intense as the light he had seen on his motorcycle.

George's shadow collapsed to his knees and remained still. A wisp of smoke seemed to rise from his body and was absorbed into the

stranger's cane.

At any other time, Daniel's eyes would have widened in fear, but his pain was too overwhelming for him to react. Still, a deep dread settled inside him. As the brilliant red light faded, the sound of the door closing echoed through the entire house.

At the end of the hallway, a tall Black man appeared. He was incredibly broad-shouldered, his imposing figure nearly filling the doorway. Daniel was nearly 6.5 feet tall, yet when he looked at the man, he realized he was at least 6 to 8 inches taller than him. Contrary to what one might expect, the stranger wasn't overweight—he had a lean, athletic build. He seemed to be in his late forties or early fifties. His towering height, combined with the fedora on his head, forced him to duck slightly as he stepped through the doorway.

Despite the warm summer night, he was wearing a long, black overcoat. The intricate, shimmering embroidery and embellishments on it gave him an unusual appearance.

Daniel's eyes locked onto the cane in the man's right hand. This wasn't an ordinary cane, nor was it meant for walking. It was rather short in length. At the top, a carved bird's head with piercing red eyes stared back at him. The man gripped the cane just below the bird's head, his massive hands making it look as though he were strangling the creature.

Noticing Daniel's gaze, the man spoke. "Vulture," he said, his voice deep and raspy. He pulled the single armchair next to the bed as if it were a tiny stool and sat down. The bird's red eyes slowly faded to white.

Daniel wanted to ask who this man was, why he was here, and what he had done to his friend. But the stabbing pain in his head and the burning sensation in his chest wouldn't allow it. And then, there was the fear—the overwhelming, suffocating fear.

Only a faint groan escaped his lips.

"How are your pains?" the man asked. After waiting a few seconds, he realized Daniel wouldn't answer. "The first night is always the hardest," he continued, extending his cane toward Daniel.

As the vulture figure approached with its pure white eyes, the fear inside Daniel grew. This time, the bird's white eyes turned yellow, radiating a wave of light in the same hue. A pleasant warmth spread through Daniel's body. The tension that had stiffened his muscles in fear melted away. He surrendered himself to the sensation of relief.

"Good," the man said with a faint smile. "This will be a successful transformation. Painful, yes… but successful." Then, he pulled back his cane and sat back down on the small armchair.

"You'll be comfortable for a while," he added, leaning back. He adjusted the fedora on his head, placed the cane on the floor, and

rested it against the armchair. The bird's eyes had now returned to a snowy white. "It will give us enough time to talk."

The word transformation had just been added to the growing list of things Daniel wanted to ask about. The unknown gnawed at him. But now, the lightning bolts in his head and the fire in his chest had faded into a refreshing calm. His next groan carried a hint of relief. At this point, he wouldn't have minded if this strange man sat in his room for the rest of his life.

As the pain subsided, Daniel was finally able to think more clearly. There were so many questions racing through his mind that he didn't know where to start. But one image overshadowed everything else—George's fall.

"What happened to my friend?" he asked, the unease in his voice unmistakable. He feared the answer would only terrify him further.

The stranger turned his gaze to Daniel. "Don't worry, he's fine," he said in a reassuring tone. He gave a light tap to the vulture figure atop his cane. "He'll be my guest for a while," he added.

With every sentence, Daniel's confusion deepened. He had no idea what the man was talking about. "I don't understand," he managed to say, his bewilderment seeping into his voice.

"You will, soon enough."

"And who are you?"

The man straightened in his armchair. "My name is Malcolm Royce Holloway. I will be responsible for your training and development."

"Training?"

"Tonight, you're about to gain some abilities."

"Abilities?" Daniel's voice was faint, crushed under the weight of the questions flooding his mind. With each sentence the man spoke, a new mystery unfolded. He was getting lost in the flow of the conversation.

"You will no longer have fears. Everything you were once afraid of will become your greatest treasure tonight."

This explanation did nothing but add another question to the growing list in Daniel's mind. More than anything, he wanted to know how this was possible. But before he could move his lips to ask, he noticed the man lifting his cane.

The vulture figure's eyes suddenly turned green. Sitting in his armchair, Holloway raised his hand. In the air, a green glow flickered to life. Within moments, the light took the shape of a translucent hand, the same size as his own.

Daniel's eyes widened. He watched this display of light with a mixture of awe, confusion, and fear.

Holloway extended his hand forward. The floating green glow mirrored his every movement with perfect precision. As he brought

his fingers together and twisted his wrist, the shimmering light drifted toward the door and turned the switch. The room was instantly plunged into darkness once more.

The glowing hand lingered in the air for a few more moments before slowly fading into nothingness.

Daniel could only see the green glow flickering within the vulture's eyes. But when that too disappeared a second later, his breath caught. It felt as if shadows were shifting in the darkness, creeping toward him, ready to strike.

"What are you doing?" Daniel asked, his voice trembling.

"Wait."

But Daniel had neither the courage nor the strength to wait. The room had been swallowed by darkness for more than ten seconds—far beyond the limit of what he could endure.

"Please!" he pleaded, sinking deeper into the bed.

"I said wait."

Daniel squeezed his eyes shut. He tried to trick his mind into believing the room wasn't truly dark.

"Open your eyes and look at me," Holloway commanded, his voice a deep growl.

Like a soldier obeying an order, Daniel immediately opened his eyes and turned toward the voice.

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If his father had seen Daniel in such an obedient state, he might have felt proud of his son for the first time. For years, he had wanted Daniel to become a soldier like him. But it wasn't just a wish—it was a rigid imposition.

Daniel's high school years had been shaped by his father's strict discipline and relentless military training. The only person who had ever shielded him from this pressure was his mother. After her death, he could hardly find a moment to breathe. Every day, he felt more suffocated.

His fear of the dark was another thing that drove his father mad. But what truly broke his father's patience was Daniel waking up from nightmares where he was a soldier, killing people. Eventually, his father had come to a conclusion—his son was nothing more than a useless coward. And with that, he had finally abandoned his efforts to shape Daniel into what he wanted.

Yet even then, Daniel hadn't gained the luxury of making his own choices in life. The thought of expressing his desire to become a chef like his mother was impossible.

Instead, he had been forced to submit to yet another of his father's
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expectations and had enrolled in history at Lingerwood University.

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"Focus carefully," Holloway continued, his voice echoing through the darkness. "Focus on where I am and forget the darkness. It is not an obstacle for you."

Daniel had no other choice. He felt compelled to do as he was told. Squinting, he kept staring into the darkness. But, naturally, he couldn't see a thing in the pitch black.

"Don't lose focus," Holloway said, his voice carrying a mix of patience and firmness. "Suppress the fear inside you. Start by recalling the last thing you saw. Picture me sitting here, just before the lights went out."

Daniel quickly scanned his mind, trying to recreate Holloway's last appearance before the room was plunged into darkness. But his fear kept him from concentrating. He shook his head. "Everything looks the same."

"Rushing won't get you out of this any faster," Holloway said from the shadows. "If you truly focus, you'll see that something has changed."

Daniel took a deep breath. Trying to calm himself, he focused on recalling every detail of Holloway—the thin goatee, the strange embroidered overcoat, the vulture-headed cane, the leather boots. He visualized them all, as if capturing a photograph in his mind.

Then, the colors in the image began to fade, sinking into the darkness. The shadows that had seemed ready to attack him moments ago now started forming the scene in his mind. But something was missing—Holloway's fedora. He couldn't complete that detail. He was sure he had seen the man adjust it while sitting.

"The hat… the fedora… You were wearing a hat. I can't see it now," he whispered.

"If you can't see it, then it isn't there."

The largest shadow in the grayscale image moved. Within the darkness, it was barely more than a faint silhouette. A long arm reached down beside the armchair, picked up the fedora, and placed it atop the figure's head.

"Your sight will develop," Holloway said as he stood. "By the time we're done, the darkness will be your greatest weapon."

Daniel tried to follow Holloway's movements with his eyes. Though the man's motions were still like a faint, flickering video within the pitch black, they were now visible. The meaningless, shapeless void had taken form. He could make out the stack of books on his desk. He couldn't see Emily's face, but the framed picture

hanging on the wall was now somewhat distinct.

The moment he thought of Emily, it felt like a knife had stabbed through his heart. His mind dragged him back to the morning of this very day.

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That morning, Daniel had waited by the banks of the Roselinger River, where he and Emily had first met. Everything was prepared in advance for the proposal. The ring box sat in his pocket. His friends, led by George, were waiting on the opposite shore. The moment he got down on one knee, a photon display in the sky was set to project the words: Will you marry me?

Emily arrived and sat beside him, her tension visible even from a hundred meters away.

“Daniel!” she began.

The distant tone of her voice and the cold look in her eyes made it immediately clear—something was wrong. This wasn’t how he had imagined the moment at all. She hadn’t hugged him, hadn’t kissed him. Instead, she just sat there, rigid and distant. He chose to stay silent, watching her intently.

“The sooner, the better. We can’t go on. We have to break up,” she said, her voice steady, not even the slightest tremor of hesitation.

It felt as if he had been nailed to the bench, a crushing weight pressing down on his chest. He had heard the words, but his mind refused to process them. Every plan collapsed in an instant. The sentence she had just spoken felt like a knife stabbing into his heart.

She broke the silence once more, making it clear she had no intention of dragging out the farewell.

“Goodbye,” she said before rising from the bench and walking away without looking back.

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As the memories of the morning faded from his mind, a sharp pain stabbed into his head. The burning sensation in his chest returned just as quickly. He winced, letting out a deep groan. Everything had reset the moment Holloway left.

I wish he had stayed, he thought.

He wondered what had happened to George. Struggling to get out of bed, he quickly realized his body was too weak. His head fell back onto the pillow.

“George!” he called out, but his voice was so faint that even he could barely hear it.

He lay there in the darkness. Restless, yet not uncomfortable enough to scream. After all, neither could he get up to check on George, nor could George come in and turn on the lights.

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Daniel woke up the next afternoon. With a slight throbbing in his head, he sat up in bed and rubbed his face. The pain was still there, but it was better than the day before. His eyes landed on his desk—his books were stacked at the exact height he had seen them in the dark last night.

Stumbling slightly, he made his way toward the door, using the furniture for support. As he stepped into the hallway, he came face-to-face with a familiar sight—George. His friend was pulling a trash bag from the cleaning robot's waste compartment. Cleaning supplies were scattered around, and the entire house looked spotless.

"Are you okay?" Daniel asked.

George lifted his head from the trash bag and cast a blank stare at Daniel. His normally dark brown eyes gleamed with an eerie green light.

Daniel took a step back, locking eyes with his friend. Something about those glowing green eyes unsettled him. He recognized that glow. It was the same green light that had radiated from Holloway's cane last night.

"Leader Holloway is waiting for you in the kitchen," George said, giving a polite nod and motioning toward the room.

His words only made Daniel more uneasy.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked.

George ignored the question. Like a recorded message, he repeated the same words in the exact same tone.

"Leader Holloway is waiting for you in the kitchen. This way."

A sinking feeling tightened Daniel's chest as he reluctantly moved toward the kitchen. His eyes darted around anxiously as he stepped inside. The moment he crossed the threshold, he spoke.

"What did you do to him? He's not himself, is he?"

Holloway sat at the dining table, holding a transparent screen. Bright yellow text glowed across it.

"No, he's not," he replied quickly, sounding completely indifferent to George's condition. "How are you feeling?"

"Better than yesterday," Daniel answered.

Holloway lifted his cane, which was resting against the wall. The vulture's eyes turned yellow, and a beam of light radiated from the cane, enveloping Daniel's body. A soothing warmth spread through him, washing over every inch of his being. All the lingering pain

disappeared in an instant.

He took a deep breath and, in a quiet, shaky voice, murmured, “Thank you.”

Daniel lowered his gaze as he spoke, feeling almost like an uninvited guest in his own home. “Was it you I hit with my motorcycle last night?” he asked, his voice tinged with embarrassment.

“You didn’t hit anyone,” Holloway replied with absolute certainty. His tone was so resolute that it left no room for doubt.

Daniel didn’t respond. Instead, he sat down on the chair, glancing at Holloway with a slight sense of relief. He wanted to know more.

Holloway let out a deep breath and set the glowing tablet in his hands onto the table. As the lights on its surface faded, all that remained was a transparent, glass-like rectangle.

“It was stardust,” he said in a calm tone. “You didn’t crash into anything physical.”

Daniel straightened in his chair, his full attention now on the man across from him.

Holloway continued. “That light was stardust that had broken off from Halley’s Comet,” he said. “In reality, it collided with you.”

Daniel quickly interrupted. “It came straight at me,” he said, his voice panicked, as if trying to prove his innocence.

“Because it needed to enter a living body,” Holloway answered. “But that’s not what matters. What matters is what you are going to transform into.”

“Transform?” Daniel was starting to feel like he had last night. Every answer only left him with more questions.

“Just like how you learned to make sense of your surroundings in the dark last night. If you train, you’ll be able to see in complete darkness.”

“What kind of training?”

“One where you’ll confront your fears. But by the end of it, you won’t have a single fear left. You will be the one others fear.”

Holloway’s voice was so resolute that it left no room for doubt, igniting an immediate desire in Daniel to begin the training right away.

The idea of undergoing such a transformation pulled his mind back to the morning before—back to the moment Emily dumped him by the river and the empty space between that and his ride to Lingerwood Hill.

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After being left behind, Daniel found himself alone by the

riverbank. He had no idea how much time had passed between the moment Emily got up and the moment he decided to jump on his motorcycle and go after her. It was as if time had stopped for him.

Setting his motorcycle to autopilot, he headed toward Emily's house. Along the way, he scanned his surroundings, searching for her, but she was nowhere to be found. Thinking he might have unknowingly passed her, he turned back—and at the sight before him, it felt as if a knife had been plunged into his heart.

He spotted Emily kissing a man he had never seen before in the outdoor seating area of the café on the corner. A strange sensation churned in his stomach, but he couldn't define it. Anger, jealousy, sorrow, frustration, shock, pain… He had no idea which of them he was feeling.

Daniel had thought about confronting her, but alongside the hollow pit in his stomach, an all-too-familiar feeling held him back. Fear.

He was afraid of the thuggish-looking guy kissing Emily. The man had a shaved head, a thick build, and the kind of presence that made him seem like he was just looking for an excuse to start a fight.

Daniel had never been in a fight before—not even taken a beating. He had no way of predicting what might happen.

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He scanned Holloway from head to toe. Even his rigid stance alone was enough to radiate fear. There was no way he could find a better teacher than this man. The mere idea of being free from his fears was reason enough to train.

If he hadn't been so terrified of the dark, maybe his father would have loved him. If he hadn't been too afraid to confront the man beside Emily, at the very least, he could have demanded an explanation instead of being made a fool.

As these thoughts flooded his mind, he felt incomplete—like a part of him was missing.

"I'm in. Train me," he blurted out.

***

For the next week, every day felt almost the same for Daniel. Malcolm Holloway was just as strict in discipline as his father had been. He arrived at Daniel's house early in the morning, and the first thing he did was cloud George's mind with his cane. The poor roommate became nothing more than a puppet, obeying Holloway's every command throughout the day.

Even Daniel's meals were dictated by Holloway. He was forbidden from eating anything other than what Holloway provided. But the food he brought felt like an unbearable test. Broccoli, cauliflower, and cabbage—vegetables Daniel had despised all his life—suddenly seemed like a feast compared to the meals Holloway forced him to eat.

On the first day of training, Malcolm Holloway brought a plate full of grass and rose petals. Daniel burst into laughter, thinking it was a joke. But it only took him a few seconds to notice Holloway's serious, rigid stare. The moment he saw that cold, expressionless face, he fell silent.

On another evening, he was delighted to see meat on the table. He eagerly dug in, only to find out halfway through the meal that he was eating turtle. His stomach immediately turned, and he barely made it to the bathroom in time.

When he returned to the table, avoiding Holloway's gaze with still-watery eyes, he asked, "Why do I have to eat this?"

"It will make you stronger," Holloway replied. "It's not about what you eat, but why you eat it. Look at how you're changing."

Daniel nodded silently. After that day, he never complained about the food again. He had two reasons. First, as long as Holloway was around, the burning sensation in his chest and the lightning strikes in his head completely disappeared. That alone was a huge relief. Second, for the first time in his life, at the age of twenty, his fear of the dark had started to fade.

Just as he had on the first night, Holloway kept pushing Daniel to see in the dark. Every day, he made it more difficult, and in the end, Daniel made significant progress.

For the first two days, whenever the lights in the room went out, fear took over Daniel. His heart pounded, his breathing became erratic, and every shadow in the darkness seemed like a threat. But now, he could distinguish dark gray silhouettes more clearly. Even when the house was completely dark, he had learned to make sense of people's movements. At one point, Holloway had even said, "Well done," to him.

In the last three days, he had chosen to sleep in the dark entirely of his own will. He finally felt like he had carved out a place for himself in this black void.

On Sunday, they were in Daniel's room, repeating their usual routine. Holloway lifted his cane and waved it slowly through the air. A green beam of light shot from the vulture's eyes, rapidly filling the room. At first, the light was bright, covering every inch of space, but then it gradually darkened—until it became pure, absolute darkness.

The sight he saw every day still amazed Daniel. Even with the

curtains wide open, daylight was completely erased. He still couldn't grasp how Holloway managed to create this darkness.

"How do you feel, Daniel?"

Daniel's heart was beating a little faster than usual. "Tense," he admitted.

"But you're not panicking."

"No."

"Good," Holloway said, pleased. "Now, how do you see your surroundings? Is everything still just dark gray silhouettes?"

Daniel glanced around his room. On the first day, he could only make sense of what was happening through gray silhouettes in the pitch black. But with each passing day, those silhouettes had grown sharper.

"It's different," Daniel said quickly. His voice carried a hint of excitement—his perception of darkness had shifted once again. He turned in place, scanning every corner of the room. "It's like an old black-and-white film."

"Very good, Daniel. It'll improve even more soon." Holloway swung his cane toward the floor. The cloud of darkness that had filled the room rapidly shifted to green before being drawn back into the vulture's glowing eyes.

Suddenly, the black-and-white film in Daniel's vision exploded into full color. Only now did he realize that he had actually been seeing everything correctly, even in the darkness.

"Once you develop a little more, you'll see like this in the dark too," Holloway said in a calm voice. He slowly sat on the bed, locking eyes with Daniel. "I believe there's more to you. But I can't train you here any longer. I have to take you home," he added.

Daniel parted his lips as if to say something, but Holloway didn't give him the chance. "Fear of the dark is something almost everyone has. But you will be trained to uncover something more. To be different from the rest," he said.

Daniel lowered his head, weighing the pros and cons of Holloway's offer in his mind. He could end the training here, sleep in the dark, and move on with his life. But once Holloway left, there would be no one to ease his pain.

After Emily had left him, he had thrown himself into an entirely new routine. Holloway's training had become a shadow that dulled the ache of her absence. But if Holloway left too, he had no idea what he would do when he woke up tomorrow. That uncertainty spread through his mind like an ever-growing abyss.

"I suppose staying with you for a few days wouldn't hurt. So, where's your place?"

Holloway was slightly surprised by the question. He realized that

Daniel assumed they were heading to an ordinary house, but he quickly erased the surprise from his face and chose not to correct the misunderstanding.

"We're going to the capital."

"So, you live in the big city. When are we leaving?"

"Tomorrow," Holloway answered, short and to the point.

CHAPTER II

GATEWAY

The next morning, they set out on their drive. By noon, they had reached the capital. Malcolm Holloway was driving an old Chevrolet Blazer, as massive and imposing as himself. The jet-black SUV dated back to the late ‘90s, making it around sixty to sixty-five years old. In an era where cars no longer even had steering wheels, the only technological feature in Holloway’s vehicle was its automatic windows.

They had traveled in what felt like a relic of the past, turning a two-hour drive into a five-hour ordeal.

As they made their way through the narrow streets of Kingsford, the city’s most historic and tourist-filled district, rows of small shops lined both sides of the road—restaurants, souvenir stores, ice cream parlors, and toy shops.

A little further ahead, a large group of tourists was waiting in line outside a small, incredibly old building. Holloway pulled the car to a stop right in front of them. Every pair of eyes turned toward them. In this historic part of town, their car—nearly as ancient as the surroundings—naturally drew attention.

Daniel shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He slid down slightly, trying to disappear from sight. His face burned red as he avoided making eye contact with the people outside.

Daniel was no stranger to being stared at. His loud motorcycle always turned heads, drawing attention wherever he went. But this time, things were different.

Directly across from them, a blonde German tourist was watching them intently. The owner of the souvenir shop across the street peered through the glass display with a curious expression. A Japanese woman had her camera aimed straight at them, her finger hovering just above the shutter button.

She was about to take the shot when a young man swiftly reached out and pushed her camera down, stopping her from capturing the photo.

The young man, seemingly Daniel’s age, was in his early twenties. His jet-black hair cascaded down to his waist, making him stand out immediately. His pale, almost ghostly white face was completely devoid of any facial hair. He wore a coat as striking as Holloway’s, and his loose-fitting pants bore an embroidered emblem at the knee—

the same vulture symbol Daniel had seen at the tip of Holloway's cane. But there was one difference: the vulture's head was encased within a triangle.

"Get out," Holloway ordered curtly. He had already opened his own door.

Daniel obeyed without hesitation. As he jumped down from the tall vehicle onto the cobblestone street, he found himself face-to-face with the young man who had stopped the Japanese tourist. The moment he locked eyes with the man's piercing blue gaze, he felt his blood freeze for an instant. He quickly averted his eyes.

As Holloway rounded the car to join them, the tourists' interest shifted to his towering figure.

The building before them was the entrance to an old imperial-era cistern. The reason for the long line was that it had been converted into a museum. However, at this hour, the museum was on its scheduled break, and no visitors were allowed inside.

The long-haired young man offered a slight smile. "Welcome, sir," he said.

Holloway responded with a brief nod. "Let's go, Sylvester," he said and headed for the door.

Sylvester stepped forward briskly, parting the crowd as he led the way. Together, they wove through the gathered tourists and arrived at the large stone entrance of the cistern. Sylvester extended his arm toward the entrance, motioning for Holloway and Daniel to step inside.

Daniel's shoulders straightened involuntarily. He felt more important than ever before. Having someone clear the way for him, hold doors open—these small gestures filled him with a quiet sense of pride. This feeling granted him a newfound confidence, something he had never experienced before.

As always, Holloway bent slightly and squeezed through the doorway with some difficulty. Daniel and Sylvester followed closely behind. A murmur of discontent rippled through the crowd waiting outside. The anger of the people found expression in multiple languages. It didn't take knowledge of any particular tongue to understand they were the targets of profanity-laced complaints. They had just been cursed at in at least five different languages for entering while others were left waiting.

Daniel had expected to be heading to Holloway's home, so he couldn't understand why they were suddenly in the middle of what felt like a tourist excursion. He was also incredibly curious about Sylvester—who he was, why he was here—but he didn't have the courage to ask.

They stepped inside the cistern. Descending eight to ten steps lined

with modern granite, they passed through another door and were met with a breathtaking sight. Daniel held his breath as he took it all in. Towering ancient domes loomed above them, supported by rows of massive columns. The grandeur of it all left him in awe. He had never been here before, and the sheer magnificence of what he saw captivated him.

Following Holloway's lead, they began walking between the columns. The cistern was completely empty except for them. Their path resembled a wooden pier, with a shallow pool of water—no more than twenty centimeters deep—spreading across the entire floor of the structure.

"We ran into some people from the Academy," Sylvester broke the silence. His voice echoed throughout the vast cistern.

Without slowing his pace for even a moment, Holloway asked, "For your intern?"

"Yes, sir. They thought they could take her from me," Sylvester replied, his tone carrying both clear disdain and possessiveness.

"Good," Holloway said. "You handled your first encounter well."

"Thank you, sir," Sylvester responded, a hint of pride in his voice.

Daniel tried to follow the conversation, but it felt as though they were speaking a foreign language. He recognized the words, yet their meaning was utterly lost on him. This uncertainty made the tension within him grow.

When they reached the last of the towering columns, Holloway stepped down into the water. Daniel hesitated for a moment, staring at the rippling surface. He wasn't sure whether he should follow. Then, suddenly, he felt Sylvester's hand on his back. At that touch, he let himself drop into the water.

A second later, he heard another pair of feet splashing in behind him. Ice-cold water seeped into his shoes, and a deep chill spread through his bones. Now he fully understood why Holloway and Sylvester had been wearing boots on this summer night. With each step, the freezing water crept deeper into his body, numbing his toes as they slowly turned stiff.

Wading through the water, they entered a dark corridor. There were no columns here, no grand domes overhead. Not even a single light illuminated the corridor. The section they had just left had been carefully restored, but this part looked so ancient it seemed as if a mere touch could bring it crumbling down.

Daniel's week of training had paid off. As he moved through the pitch-black corridor, he felt no fear of the darkness. The uncertainty of his situation left him uneasy, but the darkness itself no longer frightened him. Besides, a light had already begun to shine at the corridor's end—a sharp, golden glow that appeared as if it had

materialized from nothing.

Then, suddenly, he felt weightless, as though gravity had lost its hold on him. It was as if the light was pulling him in. He couldn't tell whether he was still walking or if he had begun to float. The icy numbness in his feet had vanished completely.

He tried to lower his head, but he couldn't. His eyes and mind were locked onto the radiance ahead, unable to break away.

The light felt eerily familiar. It grew brighter and brighter, stirring a memory within him—the stardust he had seen while riding his motorcycle. Just like that night, he felt himself being drawn into it.

He closed his eyes, and every thought in his mind dissolved into nothingness.

In less than a second, he felt his consciousness flicker back to life. As he opened his eyes, the brilliant light was beginning to fade. Sensation returned to his feet, and the icy water soaking his socks sent a sudden shiver through his body.

Then, he realized he was stepping forward. Gravity had returned. He wasn't making a conscious effort to move, yet every motion felt automatic, as natural as breathing—unconscious but inevitable. As the last remnants of the light vanished, Daniel became aware that they were no longer in the same place.

At the end of the short, dark corridor, an oval door slid open without a sound. Inside, the floor gleamed, covered in polished black granite. Towering gray walls loomed over them, casting a cold and weighty atmosphere over the space. Above, rows of columns supported the ceiling, reminiscent of the cistern they had just left.

To the side of the entrance, an elderly man stood before a translucent screen. The screen emitted a soft golden glow, much like Holloway's tablet. The man looked as though he had been standing there for a thousand years—worn, tired, as if time had settled into his bones.

On the opposite side of the room, a door framed in pristine white granite stood in stark contrast to the dark surroundings. It seemed to glow, almost as if it were radiating its own light.

Above the door, embedded within a triangular frame, was the carving of a vulture's head.

Daniel recognized it immediately. It was the same symbol that adorned Holloway's cane and Sylvester's trousers.

This must be the place Holloway calls home, Daniel thought.

"Welcome to the Nivorum Gateway," the elderly man said, his voice weary and uneasy. He looked as if the slightest sound might send him into a faint. His trembling hands reached for the screen, and the gateway they had used to enter vanished.

Daniel's gaze kept shifting from one point to another. He expected

Holloway to explain who the old man was or at least say something about where they had arrived. But as always, Holloway remained silent.

Without acknowledging either the elderly man or Daniel, Holloway and Sylvester strode toward the gleaming white door as if they were the only ones in the room.

Holloway extended his cane toward a small panel beside the door. The vulture's eyes on the cane glowed with the same familiar golden light as the vulture symbol above the door.

With a soft hiss, the door slid open, and an icy gust of air rushed in from the other side.

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As they stepped through the door, the air was dark and filled with biting wind. Daniel felt the sharp sting of snowflakes striking his face, forcing him to raise his hands as a shield. He wanted to take in his surroundings, but even squinting did little to help against the relentless gusts.

The only thing he could make out were the rows of green-coated men standing on either side of the single-story structure they had just exited. They were identical from head to toe—not a single one wearing anything that reflected personal style, unlike Holloway or Sylvester.

Daniel's attention was drawn to the old bus parked directly in front of them. Its windows were entirely covered in black film, making it impossible to see inside. A green-coated figure stood guard at each door, one at the front and one at the rear, completely motionless—like statues carved from stone.

Holloway and Sylvester made their way toward the front entrance of the bus, and Daniel followed close behind. "
The area was lined with elegant statues and granite columns.

When the bus doors opened, Daniel caught sight of the driver—yet another man in the same uniform.

Holloway stepped inside and took a seat directly behind the driver. A partition panel stood behind the seat, dividing the bus into two sections.

As Daniel leaned forward to step in, he suddenly felt a force pulling him backward by his clothes.

Sylvester had grabbed him, yanking him a few steps away from the bus. His voice carried a clear, undeniable darkness.

"Go to the back."

Daniel's body tensed instantly. Just looking into the icy blue eyes of the pale young man before him sent him spiraling into a thousand

different fears. He could feel his blood rushing frantically through his veins, scattering in every direction. Sylvester's gaze was colder than the snowflakes striking his face.

"O-okay," was all he managed to say, his voice so faint it barely escaped his lips. He gave a quick nod, but Sylvester's piercing stare had him frozen in place, unable to move.

"To the back," Sylvester repeated, this time pushing Daniel by the shoulder.

Daniel swallowed with difficulty and forced himself to walk toward the rear door. He wanted to turn back, to steal another glance at Sylvester, but he couldn't summon the courage. With every step, he felt the weight of Sylvester's unyielding stare pressing down on him.

The green-coated man standing by the back door moved swiftly, opening it with a sharp motion. The moment the door swung open, a hand reached out from inside, grabbing Daniel and pulling him in.

As soon as he was inside, a wave of unease crashed over him.

The bus had been stripped of all its seats. It was designed to fit as many people as possible. The air was stifling, thick with the presence of too many bodies packed into too small a space.

Some people leaned against the blacked-out windows, others sat on the floor, waiting. Some were crying. Others were eerily silent, detached from everything around them. Every person carried a different kind of despair.

Daniel, his legs nearly giving out beneath him, pushed deeper into the crowded space. His breath quickened as he squeezed past the bodies, navigating through the oppressive atmosphere.

Finally, he found a small spot where he could sit.

Right beside him, sitting on the cold floor, was a girl. Her head was bowed, her face hidden from view. The tension in her posture was unmistakable. Her long, wavy dark brown hair and messy bangs reminded Daniel of someone—someone he wished to forget: his old love, Emily.

His heart stuttered for a brief second, then pounded back to life, forcing blood through his veins with renewed urgency. Everything that had happened in the past few days flashed before his eyes like a reel of film, rapid and relentless.

He looked at the girl more closely. Seeing Emily here, in a place so unfamiliar, was the last thing he wanted.

The girl still hadn't lifted her head. She had buried her face into her arms, which were wrapped tightly around her knees.

Daniel's curiosity got the better of him. Before he could stop himself, a name slipped past his lips. "Emily."

The girl stirred at the sound of someone speaking right next to her. Slowly, she lifted her head.

Daniel's heart felt like it had lodged itself in his throat. A heavy lump sat in his chest, blocking his breath. But the moment their eyes met, he knew—she wasn't Emily.

Relief flooded through him, spreading warmth through his chest.

Behind the thin, round frames of her glasses, her honey-colored eyes shimmered with quiet sorrow. The tattoos scattered across her arms seemed to tell a story: delicate cat silhouettes, famous paintings, and intricate cathedral sketches.

Had Daniel seen her in a different setting—perhaps on a school campus—he might have thought she was effortlessly cool, an artsy, bohemian type. But here, she only looked afraid.

Her voice was quiet, timid. "My name is Brenda. Not Emily."

Daniel hesitated for a moment, unsure of what to say. "Nice to meet you," he finally said, though his words felt empty. The only thing he truly felt was relief—relief that the girl in front of him wasn't Emily. The tight knot in his chest unraveled, his heartbeat steadied, and his breath finally evened out.

Just then, one of the uniformed men barked out a sharp order.

"Silence!"

Brenda flinched at the harsh command, quickly burying her head back into her arms as if trying to hide from the world. But another sound made her fear spike even more—the deep rumble of the bus's engine.

The entire vehicle began to shake violently. Brenda pulled her legs closer to her chest. She was already quite short, but now, curled up like this, she looked even smaller.

Daniel focused entirely on her. He was afraid too—lost in the same uncertainty—but watching Brenda flinch at every unexpected noise stirred something inside him. Seeing her so defenseless and timid triggered a protective instinct in him.

"Don't worry. There's nothing to be afraid of," he said, keeping his voice as calm as possible.

The bus rumbled forward, moving steadily for about ten or fifteen minutes before coming to a sudden stop.

Daniel couldn't see outside through the blacked-out windows, and that only made his anxiety worse.

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The biggest reason behind his fights with Emily had always been this: they were as different as black and white.

Daniel generally disliked socializing. Aside from a few close friends, he had no interest in spending time with others.

Emily, on the other hand, was the complete opposite. Like a social

butterfly, she was always in motion, constantly meeting new people and insisting on going to new places. Daniel could never keep up with her endless energy.

Every step Daniel took into the unknown filled him with an indescribable sense of unease. The moment he left the safety of his shell, his heart would pound faster, his breath would grow shallow.

At one event Emily had dragged him to—a gathering full of strangers—Daniel had felt trapped in the crowd. His breathing had become so erratic that, for a brief moment, he genuinely thought he was having a heart attack. But it had only been yet another manifestation of his relentless anxiety.

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The bus came to an abrupt stop. The engines fell silent. A heavy, unsettling quiet settled over them.

Brenda shrank even further into herself, as if trying to disappear completely.

“Get ready! Line up in a single file!” a green uniformed man barked.

Like everyone else, Daniel obeyed. Brenda also rose from her seat, moving carefully. Her already pale skin had turned ghostly white from fear. Even if Daniel hadn’t trained his eyes to see in the dark, he would have noticed just how drained she looked.

He stepped down the bus stairs alongside Brenda. The freezing air slashed at his face like a knife. Snowflakes, carried by the wind, pelted his skin and blurred his vision. He squinted, trying to make out his surroundings, but the snowfall was so thick that even the front of the group was barely visible.

“Stay in line. Move forward in pairs!” another soldier commanded.

She flinched at the sudden order and instinctively grabbed Daniel’s arm. The force of it threw him off balance, nearly making him slip on the icy ground. His foot skidded, but he somehow managed to steady himself.

He considered pulling his arm away, but she looked so utterly helpless that he couldn’t bring himself to do it.

“Follow me. Keep your formation,” the soldier ordered again, his tone harsh and authoritative.

The group started moving.

They climbed a set of snow-covered stairs, their progress slowed by hesitant footsteps in the crowd ahead. No one dared to break formation, so they continued upward, sluggish but orderly.

Brenda’s grip on Daniel’s arm remained tight. It wasn’t just for balance—she was clinging to him as if trying to hold both of them
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back. But, like a train car bound to the locomotive ahead, she had no choice but to follow.

As they climbed the stairs, the silhouette of a massive building became clearer ahead.

When they passed through the double glass doors, Daniel's eyes widened in astonishment.

Right in front of them stretched a vast hall, enclosed by towering glass walls that narrowed as they reached the ceiling, nearly a hundred feet above. The raging snowstorm outside cast a silent, mesmerizing display across the glass. The floor, like the gateway they had come through, was covered in polished black granite, with the ever-present vulture emblem embedded at its center.

At the far end of the hall, a grand white granite balcony loomed above them. Two wide, curving staircases led up to it from either side. Along both walls, dozens of doors and elevators lined the space.

A large group stood on the balcony, watching them. They were arranged in two rows—twenty people in the back, standing on a slightly higher step. Each of them rested a hand on the left shoulder of the younger individuals in the front row.

At the very center, Holloway and Sylvester stood out. Holloway's sheer size made him impossible to miss, and standing on the elevated step only made him look even more imposing. His hand, like the others, rested on Sylvester's left shoulder.

A few seconds later, two doors on opposite sides of the hall swung open at the exact same moment. The synchronization was so perfect that the sound of their movement echoed as a single noise throughout the vast space.

These doors, positioned closest to the balcony, were far more elaborate than the others—adorned with delicate silver engravings and intricate carvings.

Two figures emerged from the doors.

From the right-side door stepped a man who appeared to be in his mid-sixties. Despite his age, he stood tall and fit, his posture unwavering. His ice-blue eyes matched the short yet voluminous white hair atop his head. The deep lines on his face were sharp and precise, as if drawn with a fine pen. They disappeared beneath his neatly trimmed white beard, giving him a composed and dignified appearance.

From the left-side door, a strikingly beautiful and elegant woman appeared. Her shoulder-length, wavy snow-white hair was swept to the side, framing her features. It was clear that white was not her natural hair color, yet the look gave her an air of distinction. She appeared at least twenty years younger than the man opposite her.

Her high cheekbones, defined jawline, and subtly smoky eye

makeup gave her an almost mesmerizing allure.

She wore a dark-toned outfit adorned with intricate embroidery unique to Nivorum. The embossed patterns and structured high collar emphasized her shoulders, while the fitted design accentuated her petite yet captivating figure.

Like the man, she ascended the staircase.

Daniel's eyes followed the woman's face, completely entranced by the perfection of her beauty. His thoughts became consumed by her presence.

But his momentary admiration was suddenly interrupted by the pressure on his arm.

He had completely forgotten about Brenda standing beside him.

"Beautiful, but unhappy," Brenda whispered, her timid voice barely audible. She was looking straight into his eyes.

Daniel turned to her in surprise. He had no idea how to respond at first. Then, a sudden thought struck him, and his expression shifted from confusion to alarm.

"Did I say that out loud?" he asked. The last thing he wanted was for one of the soldiers to hear him talking about this woman.

"No," she replied, shaking her head slightly. "You just thought it." Her voice was nothing more than a breath.

He had heard her words, but they made no sense to him.

"How could you know what I was thinking?" he asked.

Pressing her lips together, as if revealing a secret, she whispered, "Emilia Glisson."

"What?"

"The woman's name is Emilia Glisson," she said, lowering her glasses to the tip of her nose and peering over them.

Daniel narrowed his eyes. "Do you know her?"

She simply shook her head.

His curiosity deepened. Leaning in slightly, he whispered, "Then how do you know her name?"

Brenda answered as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "She was thinking it."

He was about to press her for more when the white-haired pair reached the top of the balcony. They stood side by side on a raised step just behind Holloway and Sylvester's two-row formation.

"I am Supreme Leader Vulton Valtorin, and this is my wife, Lady Emilia Valtorin," He announced. His voice carried absolute authority. With a graceful motion, he reached out to take Emilia's hand.

Daniel squinted up at them and muttered under his breath, "You didn't guess the last name right."

His tone wasn't mocking—he was simply trying to make sense of what had just happened. It was already strange enough that Brenda

had known the woman's first name. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't find a logical explanation for any of this.

Valtorin continued, "This is Nivorum, and this city will be your new home—the place where you will reach the most advanced versions of yourselves." His voice carried unwavering determination and confidence. His demeanor was as clear and persuasive as one would expect from a leader. As he addressed the crowd below, his gaze never wavered.

"You will possess powers that ordinary people cannot even dream of. And not just powers beyond the ordinary—but ones that will set you above even those outside of Nivorum who share your abilities. The leaders and heirs will be your guides. Perhaps some of you will even become heirs yourselves one day, earning the right to stand among Nivorum's leaders."

Supreme Leader paused, relishing the impact of his words on the crowd. Then, sharpening his tone, he continued:

"But remember this—on this difficult path, only the strongest and the bravest will endure. I know that most of you don't consider yourselves brave. But you will be. You will be trained as Interns worthy of Nivorum."

Finally, he slowly raised his hand and gestured toward the large triangular emblem with the vulture symbol at its center.

"From now on, you are part of this city's Triangle—Leaders, heirs, and interns."

The gathered group below remained silent, absorbing his words, each trying to piece together what this all meant for them.

"The leaders and heirs who brought you here will be responsible for your training. You will learn everything you need to know from them," Valtorin continued.

Then, his voice turned much harsher.

"The only thing I will say is that every rule in Nivorum is binding and absolute. Now, remain where you are. You will be assigned to your floors under their supervision."

Brenda whispered in the faintest voice, "Whatever training he's talking about… it's going to be terrifying." The fear in her voice was reflected in her face—she looked as pale as paper.

Daniel wanted to ask what she meant, but he stopped himself. Ever since the night he had nearly fallen off his motorcycle, he hadn't received a single answer that truly satisfied him.

Vulton and Emilia Valtorin descended the staircase they had arrived from, disappearing through the opposite doors. As soon as they were gone, the leaders and heirs split into two groups, making their way down the curved staircases toward Daniel and the others. Each leader or heir stopped beside one of the newcomers.

Leader Malcolm Holloway stepped to Daniel's left and stood beside him without a word.

Sylvester, on the other hand, approached Brenda. "Lower your hand," he commanded, his voice firm with authority. His pale blue eyes were fixed on her fingers.

She inhaled sharply, hesitating for a moment before obeying. Her fingers slowly loosened, and she released Daniel's arm. Lowering her head, she stared at the ground.

The group slowly began to move. They separated, splitting into two directions. Each leader and heir took charge of their assigned Intern, leading them away. Holloway guided Daniel to the left, while Sylvester directed Brenda to the right.

She glanced back at Daniel one last time. Her honey-colored eyes shimmered with barely restrained tears.

The fear of the unknown, combined with that final look, sent a crushing sense of helplessness through Daniel. Her words echoed in his mind—how terrifying their training would be.

Images of Brenda's fearful expressions flashed before him. The way she had curled up on the bus, how she had clung to his arm for reassurance, the tremor in her voice, the near-tears in her eyes… And now, they were being torn apart completely.

Would he ever see her again? Would she be okay? What would this so-called "training" turn them into?

The uncertainty tightened around his chest like a vice.

But what unsettled him most was the strange ache in his gut.

He saw Brenda not as a stranger, but as a helpless little girl pleading for his help. A strange, inexplicable urgency stirred within him for this girl he had only just met.

Daniel met her gaze, wanting to say something—anything—to reassure her. But with Holloway and Sylvester watching, the words wouldn't come.

Just then, she closed her eyes for a brief moment and smiled faintly.

It was small, almost imperceptible, yet it reached him like a quiet understanding.

Daniel's anxiety lessened.

It was as if she had heard every thought running through his mind.

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Leader Holloway and Daniel stepped into the elevator to ascend to the thirteenth floor. Beside them stood a leader in his late forties, accompanied by a boy who looked no older than fifteen.

Daniel's gaze lingered on the boy. He had jet-black, bristly hair

and thick eyebrows. His face was speckled with various-sized moles, but what caught Daniel's attention most was how effortlessly the kid seemed to adapt to this new environment. While Daniel was still grappling with everything, this boy looked as if he had already adapted within minutes.

With a sharp chime, the elevator came to a stop, and the doors slid open. Daniel took a deep breath before following Holloway and the other leader onto the thirteenth floor.

This level housed four small living quarters, a gym, a mini-library, a lounge area, a dining room, and a meeting hall. The high-ceilinged corridor was lined with black carpets, and the walls were painted dark gray. Though the high ceiling should have made the space feel open and airy, the color scheme ruined it, leaving behind a heavy, oppressive atmosphere.

Daniel followed Holloway to the middle of the corridor when he noticed four figures approaching from the opposite direction.

As they came closer, he recognized two of them—Sylvester, and trailing behind him, Brenda.

Seeing her again eased the tension in his chest, if only slightly. He gave her a small smile and a subtle nod in greeting.

But the moment of relief vanished instantly under Sylvester's sharp glare.

They all entered the meeting hall and took their seats around the long table. Each leader and heir sat directly across from their assigned intern.

Holloway placed a key in front of Daniel. The tag attached to it read 133, with a small vulture-shaped keychain dangling from the end.

Out of the corner of his eye, Daniel glanced at the key Sylvester had given to Brenda. Hers read 134.

It didn't take long for him to realize—they had been assigned to the two living quarters facing each other in the corridor.

Holloway then turned to the leader seated beside him—the same man they had ridden the elevator with.

"If I may, Leader Glisson," he said.

His tone was different than usual—colder, with a hint of condescension. His expression made it clear just how little regard he had for the man sitting next to him.

Leader Lando Glisson was a well-dressed, well-groomed man in his late forties. His light brown hair, marked by a few faint lines on his forehead, seemed to be resisting the passage of time. His broad shoulders and upright posture radiated confidence.

Unlike the eccentric fashion choices of most people in Nivorum, he wore a suit. Even the vulture-shaped badge on his lapel didn't look out

of place. He appeared to be the most ordinary person in the room.

"Of course," Glisson said with a nod. His voice remained even, unaffected by Holloway's cold demeanor.

Holloway turned his attention to everyone seated around the table.

"This floor is your new home. Do not lose your keys—and especially not your keychains. These symbols are a part of your identity here. Everything about you is recorded within them."

His words immediately caught the attention of every intern at the table. Now, they understood why the vulture symbol was everywhere—it was like Nivorum's version of a fingerprint.

As Holloway continued, he locked eyes with each intern one by one.

"Outside of training hours, you are free to do as you please on your assigned floor. The role you will take on in Nivorum will be determined after a year of training and testing."

A wave of surprise spread across the table. Almost none of them had been given this information before arriving.

Not wanting to invite any unwanted questions, Holloway pressed forward without pause.

"For today, you may rest. Tomorrow, you will rid yourselves of the nonsense you're wearing and be taken to get attire appropriate for Nivorum."

As he spoke, he cast a pointed glance toward Leader Glisson. The displeasure on his face was evident—he clearly expected Glisson to dress in a more elaborate manner, like the Nivorum citizens.

"Nivorum is a city that values discipline. There are no exceptions to its rules. You will find everything you need to know on the tablets provided in your living quarters." He held up a sleek, transparent device.

"Any questions?"

"What kind of training and tests will there be?" asked the young boy sitting to Daniel's left.

All eyes turned toward him. He remained completely calm, unfazed by the attention.

"Various kinds," Holloway answered briskly, glancing at his device to review the boy's information. His lips moved slightly before he lifted his gaze again, this time with a small smile.

"Kevin Danning… If you manage to improve yourself, I can already see that you'll be of great use to us."

The unexpected praise caught Daniel's attention. He became even more curious about why Holloway seemed to view this boy as important.

"Will the training be difficult?" Kevin asked, his voice as composed as before.

Holloway hesitated for a moment before replying, “Not particularly.”

Just then, a sharp pain shot through Daniel’s right leg. Brenda’s hand had latched onto him like a claw.

Without drawing attention, he glanced at her.

Her face had gone completely pale again. Her wide eyes locked onto him, as if she wanted to say something—yet no words came out.

“What happens if we fail the training?” Daniel asked. He had planned to keep quiet and avoid drawing attention, but Brenda’s reaction made him change his mind.

“Then you will leave Nivorum and continue with your lives,” Holloway said, his tone direct.

Brenda’s grip on Daniel’s leg loosened slightly. That answer seemed to bring her some relief. The idea of leaving Nivorum must have felt like an escape route.

“Then if we succeed, does that mean we won’t be able to return to our normal lives?” asked a woman who had arrived with Brenda. Her voice was steady, confident.

Curious, Daniel leaned forward slightly to get a better look at her.

She was in her mid-thirties, radiating an effortless elegance and natural beauty. Her sleek, shoulder-length light brown hair matched the confident gleam in her similarly colored eyes. Her naturally rosy cheeks and faint smile gave her a sophisticated air.

Daniel was surprised that he hadn’t noticed how striking she was earlier when they were in the corridor. But then again, Brenda’s panicked state had overshadowed everything else.

“If you succeed,” Leader Holloway said smoothly, “you will come to understand that Nivorum is your life.”

A brief silence settled over the table after Holloway’s words. In that pause, he glanced at the screen of his device once more before turning his gaze back to the woman.

“Olivia Thompson correct?” he said with a hint of mockery. “A journalist. I imagine you’re eager to get back and write about all of this.”

Olivia responded with a subtle smile.

“That would be nice, of course. But I’m open to considering my options.” Her voice was calm, yet carried a quiet challenge.

Holloway gave a slight nod before rising to his feet, followed by the other leaders and heirs.

“Don’t burden yourselves with all this today—rest,” he said. It was obvious that he had no interest in continuing the conversation with Olivia.

Daniel, however, was still looking at her, unable to pull his gaze away.

Holloway nudged Daniel's shoulder with his cane.

"Are you listening to me?"

Snapping out of it, Daniel finally tore his eyes away from Olivia's smile.

"Yes. Of course," he said hastily.

Holloway fixed him with a sharp look.

"You're my responsibility—don't forget that," he said. Then, after a pause, he added, "You're just cowardly enough to be my next heir."

Daniel felt strange at those words. Was that a compliment? Or an insult? He couldn't tell. But hearing himself labeled a coward in front of Olivia made something tighten uncomfortably in his chest.

As he tried to process it, a familiar pain returned to his leg.

Brenda had latched onto him again, her fingers digging in even harder than before. This time, she was squeezing so tightly that Daniel had to fight the urge to cry out. Her knuckles had turned completely white from the pressure.

"You're my responsibility too, Brenda. I'll be keeping a very close eye on you," Sylvester said with a twisted smile. He winked at her as he spoke.

Daniel didn't need to hear Brenda's response to know how terrified she was. He could feel it in the way her grip crushed into his leg.

Sylvester's words and the way he looked at her only deepened her fear. She didn't release her grip, not even as the leaders and heirs entered the elevator and disappeared from sight.

Only when the elevator doors finally closed did Daniel let out a slow breath, feeling the tension in the air ease just a little.

Brenda's hold loosened slightly, but his leg still throbbed from the pressure.

"Are you okay?" he asked. But the answer was painfully obvious.

Her face was as pale as a ghost.

"I'm fine," she murmured. Then, after a short pause, she added, "I will be."

CHAPTER III
HEARTBREAK

Living quarters 133 belonged to Daniel. As he stepped inside, he found himself in a small yet neatly arranged space. To the left of the entrance, there was a desk, and to the right, a couch, a coffee table, and an old, bulky television. At the back, a tiny bedroom contained a bed and a wardrobe, positioned directly across from a compact bathroom. Apart from the lack of a kitchen, it felt like a miniature home.

A few hours had passed since the meeting in the meeting hall. Each intern had retreated to their assigned quarters, and the entire floor had fallen into silence. During that time, Daniel had attempted to turn on both the outdated television and the sleek, transparent device he had seen Holloway holding—but neither responded.

With a weary sigh, he finally sank into the armchair.

Picking up the vulture-emblazoned keychain, he turned it over in his hands, studying the tiny carving. Its eyes were completely white, giving the eerie illusion that it was staring straight at him.

Whatever Holloway had told him to bring him here, Daniel felt certain that he had stepped into something far bigger than he'd realized.

His swirling thoughts were abruptly shattered by a knock at the door.

He froze for a moment before turning toward the desk to check the time. It was close to midnight.

He wasn't expecting anyone.

A nervous lump formed in his throat as he stood up. It could be Holloway… or worse, Sylvester.

The mere thought of Sylvester standing outside his door at this hour sent an icy sensation coursing through his veins.

He hesitated, then glanced through the small window beside the door.

Relief flooded through him.

Standing on the other side was Brenda.

***

Daniel pulled out the chair from his desk and sat down, leaving the couch for his guest. For the first time, Brenda looked somewhat

normal. She wasn't as pale as before, but there was still a trace of unease in her honey-colored eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said, glancing at his right leg.

"It's fine. Still works," Daniel replied with a small smile, trying to put her at ease. Then he added, "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, I'm better," she answered, averting her gaze.

He chose not to press further. He wanted to believe her, but he knew she wasn't telling the truth. Instead, he searched for a way to change the subject.

His mind landed on the moment on the bus when he had mistakenly called her Emily. He parted his lips to apologize—

"Was she your girlfriend?" Brenda asked suddenly, adjusting her glasses with casual indifference. Her voice carried genuine curiosity. She fixed her eyes on him, waiting for his answer.

Daniel blinked in surprise.

"Who?"

"Emily. Was she your girlfriend?"

"Not exactly…" Daniel started, but before he could explain the mess of his love life, he realized there was something more important to focus on.

"Wait. How did you even know I was going to ask about that?"

Brenda gave a small shrug.

"I guessed," she said, a teasing smile spreading across her lips. She seemed more at ease now, as if the weight of Nivorum had momentarily lifted from her shoulders.

"No," Daniel said, narrowing his eyes. "Earlier, when I thought that woman was beautiful, you knew. And you knew her name too." His voice took on a questioning edge as he studied her carefully.

Brenda smirked, parting her lips to answer—

But at that moment, a loud knock at the door made them both flinch.

Her smile vanished instantly.

They locked eyes, neither of them breathing.

A few seconds passed in tense silence—then the knocking came again, even harder this time.

"Open the door!"

Daniel instantly recognized the sharp voice. The person pounding on the door with such force was Sylvester.

His legs trembled involuntarily as he rose to his feet and made his way toward the door.

Brenda, who knew that voice far too well, pressed her lips together, a faint tremor appearing at the corners of her mouth. Her anxious gaze remained fixed on the door.

Daniel slowly turned the doorknob.

But before he could even pull it open, he was suddenly thrown backward.

Sylvester had slammed his palm against the door, flinging it open with enough force to send it crashing into the wall behind it.

“What are you doing in here?” he shouted.

His ice-blue eyes burned with a fire that shouldn’t have existed in something so cold. But his gaze wasn’t on Daniel—it was locked onto Brenda.

Even telling the truth felt dangerous. When Daniel spoke, his voice was unsteady.

“We were just talking.”

“Just talking, huh?” Sylvester repeated, never breaking eye contact with her.

“I hope you know when and where to keep your mouth shut, Brenda.”

She lowered her head, biting the inside of her lip in fear and distress. In that moment, it felt like her very life force was being drained away. Her already large eyes, magnified by her glasses, widened even more in terror.

But she said nothing.

She only nodded.

Daniel remained frozen. He was terrified of Sylvester.

But seeing Brenda like this—shrinking in on herself, suffocated by fear—stirred something else inside him.

A protective instinct.

For the briefest moment, he saw it in his mind—his fist clenching, swinging forward, connecting with that ice-blue eye. Sylvester’s head snapping back. His body staggering, then collapsing onto the cold corridor floor.

Brenda suddenly stood up, throwing Daniel a disapproving glance.

Sylvester, his expression laced with faint satisfaction, spoke smoothly.

“If your little chat is over…”

He stepped back slightly, creating just enough space for her to pass.

Without a word of protest, she obeyed. Moving carefully, she avoided making eye contact as she slipped past him and out into the corridor.

Sylvester then turned to Daniel, his voice dropping into a low, threatening tone.

“I would have enjoyed handling your training myself, Daniel Milner. Now, shut your door.”

Daniel did as he was told, closing the door—but his heart was still hammering in his chest.

He hesitated, unsure whether to look through the window. The thought of Sylvester still standing outside made his breath feel tight in his throat. If he pulled back the curtain, what if those ice-cold eyes were waiting for him?

Against his better judgment, he lifted the curtain slightly.

His fear was partially realized.

The moment he peeked outside, he saw Sylvester.

But this time, he wasn't looking into those frozen blue eyes.

Instead, he saw long black hair disappearing through the doorway of living quarters 134.

Sylvester followed her inside—and shut the door behind them.

***

The next morning, Daniel entered the dining room. The space was furnished simply—just a table with four chairs. On the wall, a large dumbwaiter stood out, designed to transport meals to all the floors.

He still wasn't fully awake. Rubbing his face with one hand, he stepped inside. Olivia and Kevin were already seated at the table, having breakfast.

Almost as if she had sensed his arrival beforehand, Olivia turned her gaze toward the door.

"Good morning. Have a seat, the breakfast is absolutely delightful," she said, her voice laced with light sarcasm.

Daniel immediately caught the teasing note in her tone. Based on past experiences, he already knew he was about to eat something strange. He pulled out the chair across from her and sat down.

"Good morning," he said, offering a small smile. His voice came out hesitant. Meanwhile, he absentmindedly tried to fix his messy curls. After everything that had happened last night, he had completely forgotten about this woman's presence.

"We didn't get to introduce ourselves yesterday. I'm Olivia Thompson," she said, extending her hand. Her lips curled into a warm smile, and there was a playful glint in her eyes. She had clearly noticed his shyness and seemed to be enjoying it.

Daniel hesitated for a brief moment before reaching out to shake her hand.

"Daniel Milner," he said.

The moment their hands touched, for just a fleeting second, the weight of Nivorum's mysteries faded away.

A sensation rushed through him—like thousands of tiny sparks scattering from his palm and coursing through his body. His heartbeat quickened, but it wasn't the suffocating kind of fear he felt around Sylvester.

This was different.

This made him feel alive.

It reminded him of something—two years ago, sitting inside a gently swaying gondola, feeling this exact same thrill.

^^^

Daniel had met Emily during a gondola ride over the Roselinger River.

The first time he looked into her mesmerizing green eyes, his entire world shifted. He had likened them to an uncharted forest—deep, mysterious, full of hidden paths.

Everything else had faded. Colors dulled, sounds muted.

All that remained were those two emerald circles and the soft melody of her laughter.

^^^

As Olivia slowly withdrew her hand, she smiled playfully. “Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too,” Daniel managed to say, though he stammered slightly. He hadn’t moved his hand even an inch until the very last moment their fingers parted.

And the moment they did, it felt like he had been pulled back into reality—and with it, the uneasy feeling he had been trying to ignore returned.

Brenda’s absence had been nagging at him since last night. Trying to sound casual, he asked, “Where’s the other girl?” as if he didn’t know her name.

He didn’t want Olivia to read too much into the question.

“Haven’t seen her,” Olivia replied with a shrug.

Then, Kevin—whom Daniel had almost forgotten was at the table—lifted his head from his plate.

“She left this morning. The long-haired guy took her.”

Daniel knew exactly who he meant.

The burst of life he had felt just moments ago from Olivia’s touch vanished the instant Sylvester’s name came up. His shoulders slumped, his gaze dropping to his untouched plate.

A thousand different scenarios raced through his mind.

He wouldn’t have left anyone alone with Sylvester, let alone someone as timid as Brenda.

“For the new clothes,” Kevin added. “They said we need to dress appropriately for Nivorum.”

Daniel lifted his head slightly—just in time to notice Olivia’s gaze

drifting over his shoulder. She wasn't looking at him anymore but past him, toward the doorway.

A second later, Leader Holloway stepped into the room.

Without warning, his grip closed around Daniel's shoulder "You don't want to look like the ordinary, do you?" Holloway said, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "Come on. We're going too."

***

Daniel stepped into the old elevator in the middle of the corridor, following Holloway inside.

Compared to the one they had used yesterday, this elevator was ancient. Its door had to be opened and closed manually. After stepping in, they had to pull a metal gate across to secure it—another fully manual system.

"Scan your keychain," Holloway instructed, gesturing toward a panel next to the buttons.

Daniel's eyes widened slightly—there were nearly 120 buttons on the panel.

He did as he was told, bringing his keychain close to the scanner. The moment he did, the button for the ground floor lit up faintly.

"Whenever you enter a room or use any device, you'll need to scan your symbol first," Holloway explained.

As he spoke, he scanned the vulture symbol on his cane. This time, nearly every button on the panel lit up—except for the top five floors.

Without hesitation, Holloway pressed the ground floor button.

That was when Daniel realized something.

They were highly restricted. He could access almost nothing in this building.

The elevator descended rapidly, and just as it reached the ground floor, it jolted violently with a loud clank.

For a split second, he thought they were about to crash.

Holloway pulled the doors open and stepped out as if nothing had happened.

Daniel quickly followed.

This was the same vast entrance hall where Vulton Valtorin had given his speech the day before—but today, it looked completely different.

The space buzzed with activity. People rushed back and forth, clutching folders and briefcases, making the entire place feel more like a corporate headquarters than the ominous hall he had seen last night.

Today, the massive glass walls revealed a clear view outside. Beyond them stretched a vast, snow-covered landscape.

The double doors they had entered through yesterday opened onto

a broad avenue. Lining either side of it were rows of nearly identical, two-story concrete buildings—gray and monotonous, repeating endlessly.

By the entrance, two trench-coated guards stood watch.

Everyone who entered or exited scanned their symbols, just as Daniel had done in the elevator.

Some wore them on their wallets, others on their collars, and a few even had them embedded in hair clips.

Without hesitation, Holloway walked toward the opposite end of the hall, away from the main entrance.

Daniel followed.

There was another door here. Unlike the main entrance, no guards were stationed beside it.

The moment Daniel stepped outside behind Holloway, he froze. His breath caught in his throat as his eyes widened at the sight before him. Without thinking, he turned around and looked up.

A colossal wall, nearly 160 feet high, stretched endlessly in both directions. And at the center of it stood the tallest building he had ever seen. It was the same structure they had just left—the one that housed their assigned living quarters. From the inside, it hadn't seemed that impressive. But from the outside…

It looked big enough to swallow all of Lingerwood whole.

Holloway didn't miss the curiosity and awe in Daniel's gaze. "The main building of Nivorum," he said. "The entire city's administration is run from here." Then, without warning, he grabbed Daniel's head like he was palming a ball and pushed it down slightly.

"I don't want my intern looking like a fool," he added in a firm, warning tone.

Startled by the physical correction, Daniel tried to compose himself. He took a deep breath and focused on observing his surroundings more carefully.

They stood in an open square—Nivorum Square—a vast, spacious area at the heart of the city. At the very center stood a colossal statue of Supreme Leader Vulton Valtorin. The sheer size and prominence of the figure made it clear just how important he was to this place.

The shops started at one end of the wall, curving around in a wide arc before reconnecting at the other side—forming a nearly enclosed space. One peculiar thing caught Daniel's attention—there were no streets or alleys. Nivorum Square felt more like the private courtyard of a skyscraper than a typical urban plaza. Cafés, bars, restaurants, clothing stores, shoe shops, home goods retailers—everything imaginable was here.

"Clothing is important here," Holloway stated, his usual seriousness unwavering. "On weekends and when you go out, you

need to dress in a way that upholds Nivorum's dignity."

Since they had stepped out of the elevator, everyone Daniel saw around him wore clothing that was at least as strangely embossed as Malcolm's.

"Like coats and boots?" Daniel asked.

"Not mandatory, but preferred," Holloway replied. His tone made it clear—this wasn't a suggestion, but more of an expectation.

He stopped in front of a store with a glass display showcasing two long black coats. The name Clark's was scrawled across the door in handwritten script. Holloway extended the vulture symbol on his cane toward a device held by a soldier at the entrance. For a brief moment, a bright light flashed across the transparent screen before vanishing.

Daniel quickly fumbled for his keychain, pulling it from his pocket and scanning it against the same device. The screen brightened for a second, then faded—just like the one Holloway had used before.

Holloway pushed the door open, then, with clear impatience, called back—"Get inside."

***

When Daniel returned to the thirteenth floor, he was dressed entirely in black—a standard leather jacket, slim-fit jeans, a thick turtleneck sweater, and heavy motorcycle boots, the kind you could find even in Lingerwood. On his right wrist, a wristband with the vulture symbol at its center stood out.

In his hands, he carried packages containing the clothes he would need for training, daily life, and home use. He unlocked the door to living quarters 133 and dropped the packages inside, but his mind was already elsewhere. Ever since last night, he had been wondering about Brenda.

Without hesitation, he stepped back into the corridor and headed to her door. He knocked. No answer. He waited a few moments, but the silence remained unbroken.

She might be in one of the common areas, he thought.

First stop—the lounge. Empty. Next, the dining room. Also empty. He moved on to the gym. Still no sign of her. Finally, he reached the library.

The space was small, containing only a few short bookshelves, a study desk, and a comfortable reading chair. Unlike what he was used to, the books here weren't stored digitally—they were old-fashioned, printed on paper.

His eyes immediately landed on dark brown hair. Brenda sat with her back turned toward the door, completely absorbed in a massive book, so deep in thought that she didn't even notice him enter.

“Hey,” Daniel greeted gently. He didn’t want to startle her—she was already scared of enough things as it was.

From a far corner of the library, Kevin briefly lifted his head. With a quick, lazy wave, he greeted Daniel before immediately returning to his work, scribbling something on a sheet of paper.

Brenda glanced over her shoulder but didn’t reply. Her face was marked with undeniable unhappiness.

She wore a black, sheer blouse adorned with embossed patterns and intricate embroidery. Underneath, a lace-detailed bustier and a short, slit skirt, paired with black pantyhose. A delicate ring gleamed on her right hand, its stone engraved with the vulture symbol.

Daniel stared at her outfit, momentarily at a loss for words. She looked nothing like the timid, innocent girl he had met yesterday. This wasn’t just stylish—it was meant to attract attention.

“I’m not happy about it either,” she muttered, furrowing her brows. She locked eyes with him, her voice laced with discomfort and frustration.

She slammed her thick-covered book shut with such force that Kevin, who had been absorbed in his drawing, flinched in surprise.

Daniel gave her outfit another once-over. He tried to hold back a laugh—but failed.

“Honestly, you should probably save that for the bedroom,” he teased, an amused grin creeping onto his lips.

Brenda slammed the heavy book onto the table in irritation. She was about to fire back when the library door swung open again.

Olivia strode inside, her entrance commanding instant attention.

“There you all are,” she said, spinning in place as if making sure everyone had a good look at her outfit.

She wore a sleek yet elegant black dress, its design effortlessly sophisticated. The off-shoulder cut gracefully framed her silhouette. The upper part was made of embossed woven fabric, a clear nod to Nivorum’s signature style, while the lower half cascaded into delicate layers of sheer tulle. Two large hoop earrings adorned her ears, with a personalized vulture symbol set into the left one.

Kevin looked up, his expression turning to admiration. “You look amazing,” he said with a grin.

Olivia winked in response.

His cheeks immediately flushed bright red.

Another awestruck gaze belonged to Daniel. This was the third time he had seen Olivia. The first two times, he had frozen in place—but this time was entirely different. She stood before him so effortlessly elegant and flawless that he was certain no words could ever do her beauty justice.

In that moment, he thought Olivia was the most beautiful thing in

all of Nivorum.

But his thoughts were abruptly shattered by a familiar, yet furious, voice.

“You’re such an idiot!”

Brenda shot up from her chair, storming out of the library.

The others sat in stunned silence, exchanging confused glances in the wake of her sudden outburst.

***

Daniel, Olivia, and Kevin spent the rest of the day in the lounge area, sinking into the comfortable couch and chatting at length.

At one point, Daniel—somewhat embarrassed—admitted that his greatest fear had always been the dark. But he quickly followed up by explaining that, after just a week of training, he had overcome it and could now sleep in complete darkness.

He didn’t care what Kevin thought, but Olivia’s amused smirk and her playful “Congratulations, what a grand achievement!” upset him. Still, he was completely caught up in her energy. Listening to her made him forget everything that had happened—as if he had stepped outside his own worries.

He lost track of time.

Just last night, while sitting on that bus, Emily had been on his mind. Yet ever since he had laid eyes on Olivia, he had completely forgotten that he had once been on the verge of proposing to someone else.

He couldn’t stop watching her smile—the way her lips curled as she spoke.

But that spell was broken by the very same lips—when they spoke a single name.

“Brenda.” Olivia’s voice was curious. “Why was she so angry?”

Daniel’s guilt was written all over his face. His lips pressed into a thin line as he hesitated. Finally, he explained what had happened in the library. He was honest about the joke he had made.

“You hurt her feelings,” Olivia said simply.

His guilt deepened.

“It was just a joke,” he muttered.

Olivia rolled her eyes. “You need to apologize.” There was no room for argument in her tone.

“You’re right,” he admitted.

Slowly, he pushed himself up from the couch and left the lounge. His footsteps carried him to Living Quarters 134.

He hesitated at the door, gathering his courage. Taking a deep breath, he knocked.

He knocked four or five times before he heard the elevator. Again. And again. And again.

But the door still didn't open.

When the elevator doors parted, Sylvester stepped into the corridor. The sight of Daniel standing at Brenda's door made him pause—just for a fraction of a second, almost too brief to notice. Then, without missing a beat, he kept walking.

"We run into each other a lot, Daniel," Sylvester said, his icy eyes scanning him from head to toe.

"That's because you're always on our floor," Daniel shot back, throwing him a sharp look.

The moment the words left his lips, a tingling sensation spread through his entire body. He hadn't meant to say that—his mouth had moved on its own, his gaze had slipped out of his control for just a moment.

Sylvester's frozen stare widened. He wasn't used to being answered back. With a single, deliberate motion, he jabbed Daniel's shoulder with his fingertip.

"Or maybe," he said, withdrawing his hand, "you're the one who's always where you shouldn't be."

Then, with the same force, he pounded on Brenda's door.

A few seconds later, the door open.

Brenda's honey-colored eyes were red and swollen from crying. Her face was still damp. Not once did she look at Daniel. Without a word, she stepped aside to let Sylvester in.

Every muscle in Daniel's body, tensed from fear, loosened at the sight of her. But this wasn't relief—it was the crushing weight of guilt and regret.

"You don't want to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, Daniel," Sylvester murmured.

He stepped inside and slammed the door shut, as if Daniel didn't even exist.

Daniel stood there for a while, unmoving, his shoulders slumping under the weight of it all. He had answered Sylvester back, made Brenda cry, and had just been subtly threatened.

And, most of all, Brenda opening the door for Sylvester—not him.

The weight of it all bore down on him.

Then, from inside the room, a familiar roar snapped him out of his thoughts.

"Get lost, Daniel!"

***

Olivia and Kevin listened intently as Daniel recounted what had

just happened. At the same time, they struggled to finish the meal made from tree roots on their plates.

"Weird," Olivia said, setting her fork down. "My trainer is an heir too, but he's never visited my house."

"Leader Glisson doesn't come to mine either," Kevin added, still eating.

Daniel's food remained untouched. He was only prodding it with the tip of his fork.

"What are you thinking?" Olivia asked curiously. "Do you think those two…" She trailed off, watching Daniel closely.

"No," Daniel said, lifting his head. "Brenda is terrified of him."

Olivia nodded. "Maybe it's to help her get over her fear. After all, he's her trainer. They're bound to spend time together."

But Daniel—who had looked into Sylvester's eyes twice, far too closely—was certain that wasn't the case.

***

The first day of training in Nivorum began at six in the morning, with a voice echoing throughout the entire floor.

Except for Brenda, everyone gathered around the breakfast table in the dining room, their eyes still heavy with sleep.

After breakfast, all Interns were taken to different areas for their training. Daniel followed Holloway into a small, windowless room.

At the center of the room stood a box, similar to the student lockers in school hallways. Its lid was open, lying flat on the floor.

"Get inside," Holloway ordered.

Following Holloway's command, Daniel lay down inside the box. The lid shut, and his world was instantly swallowed by darkness.

A sensation he had forgotten for the past week rushed back through his body—fear of the dark. For the first time since his second day with Holloway, he felt uneasy in the darkness.

He placed his hand against the lid. He wanted to push it open and get out, but he couldn't predict how Holloway would react.

Shadows, like swirling clouds of dust, began to shift around him in the darkness. It was as if they were waiting for the perfect moment to strike. Daniel's breath quickened.

"I want to get out," he said, his voice trembling. But in the dark, all he could hear was his own breathing. Holloway didn't respond.

For a moment, a terrifying thought crossed his mind—what if Leader Holloway had left? What if he was alone in the room?

His heartbeat pounded inside the cramped box, the sound filling his ears.

"Holloway, please. Get me out of here," he pleaded, his voice thin

with fear.

"You will call me Leader Holloway," Holloway roared from right beside the box.

Daniel let out a breathless, almost absurd smile. At least someone was still there.

He took a deep breath. The fear and shortness of breath hadn't left him, but the hammering of his heart had begun to slow.

Once again, he didn't dare say anything to Holloway. All day long, he was forced to stare into the endless void inside the dark box.

***

By the time Daniel returned to the thirteenth floor at the end of the day, he went straight to his living quarters. His mind was so drained that even as he stepped inside, dark shadows still flickered in his vision. Only after taking a cold shower did he begin to feel a little more like himself.

He decided to leave for dinner.

As he walked toward the dining room, he spotted Brenda approaching from the opposite direction.

On top of all the unanswered questions that had been circling in his mind since yesterday, there was also an apology he owed her.

"Hey, Brenda," he said hesitantly.

Brenda shot him an unimpressed look before quickly averting her gaze. Without even pausing, she kept walking.

Daniel froze, unsure of what to do. The weight of having made Brenda angry grew heavier with each passing second.

"I'm not angry. I'm hurt," Brenda said as they passed each other.

The words hit Daniel like a punch to the gut.

A moment ago, he had been miserable, thinking she was angry at him. But knowing that she was hurt instead—it was so much worse.

Anger would have faded with time. But hurt… that was far harder to mend. And the worst part was knowing she was right. He had hurt her. That truth shattered him even more.

Brenda reached her door, opened it without hesitation, and stepped inside. A moment later, she slowly closed it behind her.

Daniel considered knocking. But he couldn't summon the courage.

He stood there for a few seconds, staring at her door. Then, taking a deep breath, he turned away and made his way toward the dining room.

He wondered what kind of training the others had been through, but when he stepped inside, he found the room empty. After a long and exhausting day, everyone had already retreated to their quarters.

Daniel sat down at the table.

Tonight, his dinner was accompanied by guilt and unease.

***

That week, every single day was exactly the same.

Each morning began with a silent, sullen breakfast, followed by training. Every day, Daniel climbed into the coffin-like box and spent his hours inside his temporary grave until he returned to the thirteenth floor in the evening.

Over time, he had begun to truly associate the box with a coffin, and that thought filled him with an overwhelming fear of death.

The last day of the week was no different from the rest.

“Open the envelope, Daniel,” Leader Holloway commanded, addressing the trainee lying inside the box.

Daniel reached for the envelope tucked beside him. Holloway had handed it to him that morning before he got in.

When he tore it open, a handful of gray papers spilled out. Their centers were darker—some even looked black.

Everything inside the box had become clearer over the days he had spent in it: his clothes, his shoes, even the yellow tint of the envelope was sharp and distinct.

But these papers were the complete opposite.

“The papers have no color,” Daniel muttered in defeat.

“For now,” Holloway replied, his voice as authoritative as ever.

Daniel remained silent for a while, trying to grasp what Holloway meant.

“Darkness,” Holloway continued, “won’t always appear in places you know or recognize. From now on, you’ll have to learn to make sense of things you’ve never seen before.”

Daniel looked at the papers again. Not a single trace of color.

Everything he had seen before had slowly sharpened in his mind, gained definition, and become recognizable. But these papers… They were completely foreign to him.

Until now, he had felt like he had made real progress. He had been proud of himself for learning to see in the dark.

But now, he understood—he was still at the very beginning of the path ahead.

***

The residents of the floor had only been able to see each other briefly during breakfast and dinner throughout the week.

The intensity of the training had left everyone mentally drained.

No one had the energy to visit each other in the evenings or spend time in common areas.

For the first time, they gathered in the lounge on Friday night.

“Is Brenda still mad at you?” Olivia asked, glancing at Daniel, who was sprawled across the couch opposite her.

He took a deep breath. “She’s not angry. She’s hurt.”

“Don’t worry,” she said with a warm smile. “She’ll forgive you.”

“I haven’t seen her all week,” Kevin said from the far corner of the room. As always, he was sketching something.

In his drawing, a dark figure loomed over a much smaller human, attacking. A winged figure—an angel—was trying to stop it.

“I only saw her a couple of times when she was leaving the library,” Olivia added. “I think she’s barely leaving her place just to avoid seeing Daniel.”

Noticing the way Daniel’s shoulders slumped, she decided to change the subject.

“Training with Heir Cooper was amazing today,” she said, flashing a proud grin.

Daniel turned his gaze to Olivia, caught between the weight of Brenda’s hurt feelings and the brightness of Olivia’s smile.

“All day, I worked on sensing whether someone was watching me —and I did great,” Olivia announced, making a playful curtsy as if accepting imaginary applause.

Without looking up from his drawing, Kevin asked, “What was your fear again?”

“Occupational fears,” Olivia said with a laugh. “I have to stay hidden all the time when I’m chasing news. After a while, my biggest fear became getting caught.”

Daniel’s gaze drifted into the distance. He thought about his own fear and the training he had been receiving. His fear of the dark suddenly felt even more embarrassing.

“And what exactly will this skill get you?” he asked, forcing a confident tone. “At least I’ll be able to see in the dark.”

He was trying to console himself with the idea that his ordinary fear was turning into something extraordinary.

“If someone is secretly following or watching me, I can sense them. Actually, Heir Cooper and I worked on more than that.”

A strange heat spread across Daniel’s face. His thoughts of Brenda had completely vanished.

“More than that?” he asked, locking eyes with Olivia.

“Yes. A more intense training than usual.”

The warmth on Daniel’s face deepened.

“So… you enjoy working with him,” he said, watching Olivia curiously. He didn’t even notice how his tone had shifted. A small

wave of jealousy curled through his mind.

Olivia smiled slightly. “Of course, I do. He’s a good trainer,” she said, letting her gaze linger on Daniel, as if trying to decipher the subtext of their conversation.

“He’s handsome too,” Daniel added, curious about what she was thinking. Instead of asking her outright, he thought slipping in his own opinion and watching her reaction was a genius move.

The truth was, he did believe Heir Cooper had a better chance of impressing Olivia than he did.

Cooper’s ice-blue eyes were just as eye-catching as Sylvester’s. His medium-length, neatly cut blond hair complemented them perfectly. And the light stubble on his face gave him a mature, refined look.

His sporty jacket, embroidered with Nivorum’s signature patterns, and his relaxed demeanor set him apart from the others. The vulture-emblazoned mask he never took off, always hanging loosely around his neck, added a roguish edge to his look.

Cooper was the kind of person who could seamlessly exist at both a business meeting and a skatepark—or, depending on one’s perspective, look completely out of place in both.

Olivia immediately caught on to Daniel’s intent. “Yes, he is,” she said. “But it’s such a shame he’s five years younger than me.” Her smile widened, her gaze fixed on Daniel, openly curious about his reaction.

Daniel hesitated for a moment, trying to process both parts of her sentence separately.

The fact that Olivia was happy to train with Cooper and found him attractive clashed in his mind with her remark about his age. But then, as he recalled the fifteen-year gap between himself and Olivia, the second part of her sentence took up far more space in his thoughts. Pressing his lips together, he took a deep breath.

“What’s wrong, Daniel? You okay?” she asked teasingly, her grin turning even more mischievous. Watching Daniel waver between jealousy and helplessness was thoroughly entertaining to her.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

Olivia’s attention drifted away from him.

“The leaders are coming,” she said, staring at the empty doorway.

Even Kevin took notice of those words. He set his pencil down and turned to Olivia.

Daniel, too, stared at her with a surprised expression.

“Why are you looking at me like that? They’re coming,” she said with a shrug.

Just then, the loud rumble of the old elevator echoed through the entire floor.

CHAPTER IV
SYMBOL

All the leaders, heirs, and interns had taken their seats in the meeting room. Even Brenda, who had barely been seen for days, was sitting in the chair next to Daniel. She hadn't looked at him once. Her lingering heartbreak was clear.

Leader Holloway began speaking about the progress of the training. After a brief introduction, he said, "I'm sure you all miss your social lives. On Sunday, you'll have the chance to leave your floor and go outside."

Olivia, in particular, perked up at this news. For the past week, aside from a bit of clothes shopping, she had only been moving between training areas and the thirteenth floor. She was on the verge of losing her mind from boredom.

Holloway continued. "Tomorrow, we have a mission that requires us to return to the old world for a while. The leaders and heirs of the thirteenth floor will be participating in this mission, and any intern who wishes to volunteer may join as well. In exchange, you'll earn free movement privileges on Sunday."

"Who would like to participate?" he asked.

The first hand that shot up belonged to Kevin.

Excitedly, he said, "I'd love to join, Leader Holloway! It would be an honor to go on a mission with you."

Unexpectedly, Holloway gave the young boy a faint smile. "You are already part of a bigger plan. It's best if you stay here," he said, rejecting the request.

Kevin felt a hint of disappointment, but knowing the leaders had something important in store for him filled him with pride. "As you see fit, Leader Holloway," he said.

Daniel, on the other hand, had no interest in joining the mission. Being outside his comfort zone was not something he enjoyed. To him, the offer was nothing but unsettling.

He glanced at the others around him. Kevin was already out of the equation. And Brenda… He immediately noticed her uninterested expression. A small, involuntary smile formed on his lips.

Two whole days—plenty of chances to apologize to Brenda, he thought.

"I'm in. It'll be nice to go home," Olivia said, her usual confident, cheerful voice ringing through the room.

“This is your home,” Leader Holloway corrected her, his brows furrowing. “You won’t be interacting with anyone there. This is a mission, not a trip.”

The brightness in Olivia’s eyes dimmed instantly. Ever since learning that her training here would last a full year, she had been searching for ways to return home.

She had two reasons.

First, she wanted to leak everything she had learned about Nivorum to the newspaper she worked for. A scoop like that would make her the greatest journalist in the world.

The second reason, however, was far more personal.

She missed her family. Desperately.

The thought of being separated from them for an entire year made her soul feel suffocated, her heart squeezed tight in her chest.

As Daniel watched the brief exchange between Holloway and Olivia, he suddenly raised his hand. “I want to go too,” he said.

Holloway’s lips curled into a subtle but pleased smile. He took pride in his intern’s interest and gave him an encouraging nod.

Daniel noticed Sylvester’s condescending stare but ignored it. Volunteering for a mission no one else wanted to take on gave him the perfect opportunity to spend the weekend alone with Olivia.

Then, for a brief moment, his gaze drifted toward Brenda. She was staring off in a completely different direction, clearly unimpressed. It was as if she had seen straight through his intentions—and didn’t like them one bit.

Disappointment and frustration were written all over her face.

Daniel figured he could postpone his apology a little longer. His heartbeat quickened. He didn’t want to miss the chance to learn more about Olivia—to impress her.

“The rest of you may leave,” Holloway said. “Daniel Milner and Olivia Thompson, stay behind. We need to go over tomorrow’s details.”

As Brenda stood up, she shot Daniel a glare filled with irritation. That look alone told him postponing his apology was a mistake.

But she didn’t say a word.

He simply watched her walk away.

When his gaze finally returned to the table, he was met with Sylvester’s ugly grin.

***

The lights in Living Quarters 133 flickered on, followed by a sharp chime.

In Nivorum, this was standard procedure. The central control

system automatically activated at the designated wake-up time for the interns.

Daniel stretched with deep dissatisfaction. It felt as if he had just fallen asleep five minutes ago. The weight on his eyelids made lifting his head from the pillow a struggle.

Grumbling, he got out of bed and, following the given instructions, put on the green uniform assigned for the mission.

When he stood in front of the mirror, it didn't feel like he was looking at himself. It felt like he was staring at a photograph of his father in his youth.

The outfit he wore was nearly indistinguishable from a standard military uniform. His hand moved slowly over the fabric.

For years, this was exactly what he had been running from—becoming like his father. And now, in the mirror, he was looking at his father's younger self.

He averted his gaze in dissatisfaction, stepped out of his quarters, and headed to the dining room.

Olivia was already there. She looked just as sleep-deprived as he did.

"Good morning," he said hesitantly.

She simply nodded in response.

A few minutes later, she leaned toward him from across the table and whispered in a low voice, "I took a week off from work. I have to be back in my office by Monday."

For a moment, Daniel didn't know what to say. His heartbeat quickened. Olivia's whisper sent a shiver down his spine. His breathing became unsteady, and his pulse pounded faster than usual.

Even though he had heard her words, instead of processing them, he got lost in their effect.

"Will you help me escape today?" she asked.

That question snapped him back to reality.

The thought of Olivia wanting to leave—of possibly never seeing her again—made his racing heart sink into a dull, heavy ache.

"You want to leave?" was all he managed to say.

"I was only supposed to be here for a week. I have responsibilities."

Daniel looked at her. His admiration had blinded him to reality, but now, there was no avoiding it.

The woman sitting across from him was not just Olivia. She was an adult with a life and obligations outside of this place.

"I understand," was all he could say, forcing down his emotions.

"Will you help me?"

The weight in his chest grew heavier. Feeling utterly helpless, he gave a small nod.

***

They set off from the parking lot of the main building in a minibus that was at least as old as the SUV Leader Malcolm Holloway drove—and just as loud as the bus they had arrived in on their first day.

Daniel sat with his nose nearly pressed against the window, staring outside. The people walking along the roadside looked soulless. The rows of shops carried the same dreariness—gray and lifeless.

A vivid image of Nivorum Square formed in his mind. The people there had been happy and excited. The shops had been bright, bursting with color and energy.

Two different places, he thought.

As he leaned back against his seat, his gaze landed on Olivia. She sat diagonally ahead of him, one row forward, beside Heir Cooper. She, too, was watching the world outside with keen focus.

The thought that she might be making her final observations for her newspaper only made the weight in Daniel's chest grow heavier. The idea that Olivia would soon disappear from his life darkened his mood even further.

For the first time, he felt like there was no difference between himself and the soulless people outside.

***

This time, the passage through the gateway was slightly easier for Daniel.

At the very least, their starting point wasn't a wet surface, so he didn't feel the freezing cold. He had expected to step into the same corridor that led to the cistern again, but instead, they found themselves in a cramped cave.

They had to move in a single file—the cave was so narrow that two people couldn't pass side by side.

"Aren't we supposed to be heading to the top floor of the city library, Heir Cooper?" Olivia asked clearly.

Cooper glanced at her briefly. "That's a different gateway," he replied.

A disgruntled hum escaped Olivia. Like Daniel, she had assumed they would arrive at the same point where she had crossed before.

One by one, they stepped out through the narrow cave entrance.

The view before them was nothing but an endless grassy plain. Far in the distance, beyond a stretch of forest, there was nothing else in sight.

"We're heading toward the trees," Leader Glisson said.

In one hand, he held the transparent, shimmering screen they

always used. In the other, an old-fashioned, primitive compass. The contrast between the two technologies in his hands was almost absurd.

"You know your way around the ordinary world, of course," Holloway said in a mocking tone.

Sylvester let out a low, unpleasant laugh at the remark.

Glisson paid no attention to their mockery. Calmly, he continued examining both the compass and the screen in his hands.

After fifteen minutes of silent walking, the group had nearly reached the forested area.

"Take your positions," Holloway ordered.

^^^

In the meeting room on the thirteenth floor of Nivorum, detailed instructions about the mission had been given. It was emphasized that interns were not to interfere with anything—they were only there to observe.

Another key point was the walking formation.

Leader Holloway and Glisson would take the lead. Right behind them, Daniel and Olivia would follow, while the Heirs, Sylvester and Cooper, would remain at the back.

Cooper was responsible for the safety of his own intern, Olivia. However, the fact that Daniel's safety had been entrusted to Sylvester was a source of discomfort for both of them.

^^^

At Holloway's command, everyone shifted into the walking formation that had been discussed in the meeting room.

With each step, Daniel felt a chill run through him as he sensed Sylvester's cold breath just behind him. The only sensations around them were the scent of damp earth and the rustling of grass swaying in the wind.

Olivia, on the other hand, carried herself entirely differently. With determined strides and an upright posture, she moved as if she had been working with this team for years.

As the group advanced toward the wooded area, Glisson spoke without turning around.

"We're getting close. Keep your eyes open. What we're looking for could be a plant or an animal. Report anything you find unusual," he said. The warning was directed especially at the interns.

At that moment, a bald, stout man with a scruffy gray goatee and round sunglasses emerged from between the trees, about 90 or 100

feet away. His voice carried more warning than threat as he shouted,

"What you're looking for is with us. Leave."

Holloway and Glisson immediately darted behind nearby trees. Cooper grabbed Olivia by the shoulders and pulled her behind a small rock he deemed safe. Sylvester, too, swiftly took cover behind a tree.

But Daniel, who hadn't understood what was happening, was left standing alone in the open.

It had all happened within seconds.

Holloway gripped his cane tightly with both hands and shouted, "Weapons! Everyone, draw your weapons!"

Leader Glisson reached for the vulture-shaped symbol on his collar. With a powerful red flash, he summoned a revolver into his hand—looking at least two centuries old. But this was no ordinary gun.

It was made entirely of stardust, composed only of shimmering light.

Cooper, in a swift motion, pulled the mask from around his neck up over his face. In his left hand, he summoned a shield, pulsating with a deep blue glow, while in his right, a long sword of the same intense brightness materialized.

Sylvester, meanwhile, reached for the vulture symbol embroidered on his knee. Two whips of red light shot out, summoned in an instant. Their luminescence danced in harmony with Sylvester's long hair, whipping through the wind.

Daniel, frozen in place at the center of it all, noticed that the man ahead had also taken cover. He held a glowing red beam in his hands, but Daniel couldn't make out exactly what it was.

His heart was pounding in his throat, so hard he couldn't even swallow.

More bursts of light flickered within the tree line.

The man wasn't alone—at least six or seven others stood behind him.

Holloway raised his cane, pointing its tip directly at the stout man. From the vulture's eyes, a flurry of red light particles erupted, shooting toward the enemy. Some streaked past him, vanishing into the air. Others struck the tree trunks, shattering into glowing dust before dispersing into nothingness.

Glisson's glowing revolver quickly joined the fight. The stardust-forged bullets spewed toward their target in an unrelenting stream. Unlike a real handgun, it could fire continuously without the need to reload. Most importantly, it made no sound. The only noise during each shot was the faint hum of energy rippling through the air.

When Cooper swung his sword, waves of light identical in shape to the blade flew toward the enemy. He had left his shield beside the rock where Olivia was crouched, providing his intern with an extra

layer of protection.

Meanwhile, each flick of Sylvester's luminous whips sent dazzling waves of light slicing through the air. Every crack of the whips released a thin but intense surge of energy that pulsed outward.

Despite all this, not a single attack had come from the other side.

Instead, the stout man bellowed once more:

"You're traveling with students—stand down!"

Hearing the word student caught Daniel's attention.

After so many strict, formal titles like leader, heir, and intern, the simplicity of that word felt jarring. Unlike his own group's aggressive, offensive stance, the other side seemed more composed—almost as if they were warning them rather than engaging in a full-blown fight.

It confused him. Frozen in place, he could do nothing but watch the chaos unfold.

But Holloway's team had no intention of backing down. Instead, they pushed forward with their full firepower.

Holloway's gaze flicked to Daniel, who was still standing stiffly in the open.

"You idiot! Find some cover for your ass!" he shouted angrily.

Then, turning to Sylvester, he barked:

"Sylvester! He was your responsibility!"

Daniel flinched at Leader Holloway's words and turned to look at Sylvester.

Through the bursts of light radiating from Sylvester's whips, he caught sight of that ugly grin on his face.

It became instantly clear—this had been intentional.

Sylvester had left him exposed, deliberately abandoning him in the middle of the danger.

Even though no attack had come from the other side yet, Malcolm Holloway's shouting forced Daniel into action. He scanned his surroundings, searching for cover.

His gaze landed on a natural ditch just a few steps back. Without hesitation, he sprinted toward it and threw himself inside.

Now, he was nearly at the back of the group, and the ditch not only shielded him but also gave him a clear view of the chaotic battlefield.

"Don't force us into this, Malcolm!" the man on the other side shouted, briefly poking his head out from behind a tree.

But he was forced to duck back immediately as Holloway's cane continued to launch bursts of stardust from its vulture-shaped figure.

"Defensive fire!"

Daniel's eyes widened in shock.

A barrage of deep red light rained down from between the trees.

He threw himself to the bottom of the ditch as fast as he could.

The sheer intensity of the stardust falling around him was overwhelming. He couldn't even lift his head a single inch.

Several minutes passed before he noticed the enemy fire beginning to slow.

Cautiously, Daniel climbed to the edge of the ditch, just enough to peek over without exposing himself.

The leaders and heirs had split into two groups, flanking the enemy to divide their fire.

Olivia was still crouched behind the rock where she had taken cover. She watched the battle unfold from behind Cooper's transparent shield.

Sylvester had locked his glowing whips onto a single target. Dozens of waves of brilliant light surged toward the same spot, one after another.

The tree bark shattered with each impact, sending debris flying in every direction.

Daniel noticed an intense glow on the other side. Narrowing his eyes, he focused on Glisson.

Glisson had removed the vulture symbol from his collar and was now holding it in his hand. A cluster of light shot out from the symbol, striking the same tree Sylvester had been attacking. The brilliant red energy spread across the tree's trunk, creating a shimmering bridge of light between the symbol and the bark.

The middle-aged man who had been using the tree for cover had no idea the energy was surging through its trunk.

A few seconds later, when the current finally reached him, he let out a cry of pain and collapsed to the ground.

Glisson immediately cut off the energy flow and darted forward, vanishing into the trees.

Daniel quickly scanned his surroundings. The others had also moved deeper into the forest and had already disappeared from sight.

The barrage of stardust raining down on him had diminished—almost completely stopped. Feeling slightly safer now, he turned toward Olivia.

But Olivia suddenly pressed herself further against the rock, as if trying to hide. However, after a brief moment, she abandoned the effort and shifted into a more relaxed sitting position.

As Daniel tried to make sense of her movements, he noticed someone stepping out from behind the rock. A man, his grip tight around a knife formed from glowing stardust, was approaching Olivia. His free hand reached toward her.

Before Daniel could think, his muscles moved on their own. Instinct took over. His hand shot to the vulture symbol on his wrist.

In an instant, a crimson crossbow, forged from pure stardust,

materialized in his grip. His finger slid onto the trigger. He aimed at the man looming over Olivia—and pulled.

The glowing bolt sliced through the air, leaving a shimmering trail in its wake. The moment he fired, time seemed to slow.

For the first time, he could think. He became acutely aware of his heartbeat, pounding in his chest, and the violent tremor running through his body. Yet his mind was consumed with questions.

How had he summoned the crossbow?

How had he managed to create this weapon?

Why a crossbow?

Had he even aimed correctly?

Did he even know what he was trying to accomplish with that shot?

The bolt drifted forward as if in slow motion. Then, his mind suddenly went silent.

And the bolt accelerated.

It skimmed the ends of Olivia's light brown hair—

—before piercing straight through the bridge of the man's nose and embedding itself deep in his skull.

A brilliant light erupted from the wound, so blindingly bright that Olivia, standing just inches away, had to squint and turn her head.

***

Everything happened so fast after Daniel's shot.

The opposing group began retreating under their leader's command, and within minutes, they had completely disappeared.

All that remained was the lifeless body of the man Daniel had shot —just a few meters away from Olivia—and the other man Leader Glisson had taken down with his electric current.

Daniel threw the crossbow from his hands as if it had burned him. The moment the weapon hit the ground, its glow began to fade, and within seconds, it had completely vanished.

He immediately rushed to Olivia's side.

"Are you okay?" Daniel asked, breathless.

Olivia stared at the body on the ground. "I don't know," she murmured in a quiet voice. She took a deep breath and rested her head on Daniel's shoulder.

"I want to go back. We were supposed to return to the library rooftop today—not to this forest," she said, her voice breaking into sobs.

Daniel lifted his hand instinctively to stroke her hair but hesitated, unsure of how she might react. His hand hovered in the air before he slowly let it drop.

He had no idea what to do.

Then, he noticed Glisson watching them.

Glisson hurried over.

“Neither of you will speak a word about what happened here. Not about the weapon. Not about the shot,” he said urgently. For the first time, he sounded truly rattled.

Daniel met Glisson’s eyes, questioning why, but before he could say anything, Holloway and the heirs returned.

They stood in silence, staring at the corpse on the ground.

No one spoke.

Cooper was the first to break the silence. Seeing Olivia leaning against Daniel’s shoulder, he asked, “Is she okay?”

There was genuine concern and curiosity in his eyes.

Daniel, feeling a flicker of jealousy mixed with discomfort, simply nodded.

Olivia slowly lifted herself off Daniel’s shoulder. Focusing all her attention on Heir Cooper, she said, “I’m fine.” But her eyes were glossy, and her voice trembled. The world around her blurred—like she was looking at everyone through fogged glass.

Holloway focused all his attention on the body lying on the ground. To confirm the man was truly dead, he nudged him with the tip of his boot. “Which one of you killed him?” he asked, still inspecting the corpse.

Glisson locked eyes with Daniel.

Before the young intern could speak, Glisson answered for him.

“I believe he was hit by a shot from his own side. They must not have expected him to advance this far,” he said.

Daniel was only now beginning to fully grasp what had happened. The weight of having just ended a life started to settle on him.

But his gaze immediately drifted to Olivia, sitting beside him, on the verge of tears.

If he had hesitated for just a few seconds… He couldn’t even bear to imagine the outcome.

Knowing he had protected Olivia made the burden of taking a life slightly easier to bear.

“Nonsense,” Holloway scoffed, unimpressed.

He didn’t buy Glisson’s explanation. His eyes remained fixed on the body.

“The Academy doesn’t fire to kill.”

After a brief pause, he turned to Sylvester.

“Can you do it?” he asked.

Sylvester, who had been standing at the edge, carefully watching Glisson, curled his lips into a twisted grin.

“Yes, but it still only works for a short time,” he said, shifting his

gaze to the corpse.

Holloway nodded in approval. “As long as it speaks, that’s enough,” he said, stepping back a few paces.

Sylvester approached the lifeless body and placed his fingers over the vulture symbol on his pants.

A deep purple glow shot out from the bird’s eyes, wrapping around the dead man like a cocoon.

No one made a sound. Everyone watched Sylvester’s display in rapt silence.

Even Glisson and Cooper, usually composed, widened their eyes in astonishment.

Daniel and Olivia were no exception.

Aside from Holloway, no one had ever seen an ability like this before.

The shimmering stardust encasing the body pulsed as if infusing it with life once more.

As the glow from the vulture’s eyes faded, the corpse’s eyes suddenly flared with an eerie, deep purple light.

With a strained movement, the dead man sat up.

Before anyone could ask a question, he suddenly burst into a panicked shout:

“Stop! Don’t do it! I was just trying to help!”

Then, just as abruptly, the light in his eyes vanished.

And he collapsed back into lifelessness.

***

Brenda leaped from the couch in the lounge the moment she heard the loud rumble of the old elevator on the thirteenth floor and rushed into the corridor.

As soon as Daniel stepped out of the elevator, he saw Brenda running straight toward him. She was still wearing the clothes he had teased her about just a few days ago. The corridor lights cast a glow on her face, making the tears in her eyes glisten.

Brenda reached him as fast as she could and threw her arms around him, holding on tightly.

“I was so scared, so scared,” she murmured.

Her voice was a mix of relief and lingering hurt. The force of her embrace made Daniel stumble back a step.

Caught off guard, he didn’t know how to react. But after a week of Brenda refusing to speak to him—avoiding him at every turn—he felt a small sense of relief knowing she had finally let go of her stubbornness.

“The news said there was a firefight… that someone died. I was

losing my mind," Brenda said, still clinging to him.

A moment later, she pulled away and turned toward Olivia, who stood just behind Daniel.

"I was worried about you too, of course," she added, though her tone was noticeably more distant.

Olivia was still too shaken by everything that had happened to fully engage. She found the dynamic between Brenda and Daniel somewhat endearing, but she simply didn't have the energy to respond.

She gave a small thanks nod and, without a word, started walking toward Living Quarters 132.

Brenda, however, had already grabbed Daniel by the arm and was pulling him toward the lounge.

As he sank into the couch, Daniel asked, "There's news here?" He was certain the TV in his apartment was just for decoration.

"Of course there is. What do you watch—just entertainment shows?" Brenda retorted.

"I guess," Daniel replied.

It seemed easier to let her believe that than to admit he had no idea how to turn the damn thing on.

Then, noticing the lingering worry in Brenda's still-wet eyes, he sighed.

And he started telling her everything that had happened that day.

As Daniel spoke, the color drained from Brenda's face. Her skin turned paler and paler, and she listened with bated breath, trying to absorb every detail.

By the time Daniel finished and fell silent, Brenda slowly parted her lips.

"You killed someone," she whispered, her voice trembling.

"If I hadn't, he would have hurt Olivia," Daniel countered.

The way she had framed it—the sheer negativity of the words—made him uncomfortable.

"It all happened so fast. I didn't even have time to process it."

Brenda adjusted her glasses and kept her gaze locked on Daniel's deep black eyes.

Daniel felt the weight of her skeptical stare pressing down on him.

He needed to respond.

"I told you. He had a knife. Olivia, she—"

His voice caught in his throat. He couldn't bring himself to complete the worst possible scenario.

"He would have killed her," Brenda finished for him. This time, her tone was softer. "Maybe you're right. Maybe you were just trying to protect her."

Daniel's thoughts drifted to the reanimated corpse Sylvester had

forced to speak. Even though he had witnessed it with his own eyes, he still struggled to believe it.

How was he supposed to explain that to Brenda? It felt even harder than admitting he had killed someone.

"What do you think he meant when he said he was trying to help?" Brenda asked.

Daniel hesitated, caught off guard.

"I don't know," he admitted quietly.

Her question forced him to question himself.

For a split second, he wasn't sure if he had even told her everything.

Then, he caught the small, mischievous smile on Brenda's lips. He raised an eyebrow.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"It's nothing important," Brenda said, standing up.

She took a deep breath—

Then, with a speed even she hadn't expected, she leaned in and pressed a quick kiss to Daniel's cheek.

"I'm glad you came back," she said with a small smile.

Her face flushed pink.

Before he could react, she spun around and practically bolted out of the lounge.

Daniel stood frozen in place. He had no idea what to do. No idea what to feel.

It took him a few minutes to shake off his daze.

Only then did he finally get up and head to bed.

***

Every time Daniel closed his eyes, the same scene replayed in his mind.

The man he had killed sat up, his eyes glowing with purple light, staring straight at him.

And he repeated the same words over and over:

"I was just trying to help."

To silence the thoughts, Daniel repeated the same things to himself a thousand times:

"He was going to hurt Olivia… They were fighting us… They were bad people…"

Completely drained, he eventually drifted into sleep.

But even in his dreams, the scene refused to fade.

The man's voice echoed through the darkness again and again—

"I was just trying to help."

***

On Sunday morning, right after breakfast, Daniel and Olivia stepped into the elevator—accompanied by Brenda's furious glare.

Like everyone else in Nivorum, they were dressed in their formal weekend attire.

When Daniel saw Olivia in her outfit, he was once again mesmerized, unable to hide the admiration in his eyes. And that was exactly why Brenda's jealous gaze had turned into pure irritation.

The fact that she was still wearing the very outfit Daniel had mocked only made her frustration double.

Olivia raised her hand toward her left ear, reaching for the symbol on her earring to scan it on the elevator panel.

But before she could, Daniel stepped in with a warm smile.

"I've got it," he said, his voice light and friendly.

He gestured for Olivia to stop, then pressed the symbol on his wristband against the panel instead.

Out of the hundreds of buttons, only the one for the ground floor lit up.

Daniel pressed it, and the elevator jolted as it began its descent.

As Daniel reached out and pulled the door shut from inside, Brenda's face—flushed with anger—was the last thing he saw before it vanished from sight.

***

They had been living here for a week, but for the first time, they were leaving their floor without a leader or an heir accompanying them.

They passed eleven identical floors, one by one.

Through the glass doors and security wires, they even made brief eye contact with a few interns walking through the corridors of other floors.

As they neared the ground floor, Olivia muttered, "They're waiting for us."

The moment the elevator reached the ground floor, Heir Cooper and Leader Holloway were standing behind the door.

Before the interns could take a single step, Holloway swiftly pulled it open.

Cooper turned to his intern.

"Good morning, Miss Thompson. If you use any elevator without proper identification again, you will be disciplined."

Olivia had just parted her lips to explain when Holloway cut in.

"We expect you back by dinnertime."

The two interns simply nodded.

Without a word, they stepped out of the elevator and hurried toward the main exit directly in front of them.

But a voice from behind stopped them in their tracks.

“For Nivorum Square, use this door,” Holloway called out, gesturing toward the opposite exit.

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As they stepped into the square, the icy cold air hit their faces. They started walking across the wide-open space.

Daniel didn’t dare to break the silence—he knew he had put Olivia in a difficult situation.

Meanwhile, Olivia was fuming, still seething over the warning she had just received. Light snowflakes fell onto her exposed shoulders.

Without a second thought, Daniel quickly shrugged off his jacket and draped it over her.

“I don’t want it,” Olivia snapped, shooting him a sharp glare.

She had already gotten into trouble because of his so-called chivalry—she wasn’t about to let it happen again.

Still, Daniel left the jacket on her shoulders. He nodded toward the place directly ahead of them. “Want to get a drink?”

The day hadn’t started the way he had hoped. Instead of being celebrated as a hero, he had somehow become the main target of Olivia’s frustration.

They stepped inside a wooden bar with an orange-painted exterior and a sign that read Fast Cups.

The door groaned loudly as it swung open, as if it hadn’t been oiled in centuries. Just before entering, both of them carefully scanned their symbols, making sure not to repeat the same mistake.

The bar was spacious. Around each wooden table sat four worn-out chairs. Thick wooden pillars supported the second floor, standing prominently in the center of the space. The entire place felt more like a carpenter’s workshop than a bar. The air smelled more of sawdust than alcohol.

“Whatever the strongest drink you have is, I’ll take it,” Olivia said.

She hadn’t even seen the waiter yet, but she could sense him approaching from behind.

Daniel, deciding to match her order, added, “Same for me.” His voice was much more polite.

He guessed the waiter was at least seventy years old. It took the man less than ten seconds to leave and return with two glasses of alcohol. As he placed them on the table, he noticed the surprised expressions on their faces.

With a small smile, he said, “The name’s Mark Oscar. I own Fast Cups.”

“Nice to meet you,” Olivia said, her voice coming out a little softer than she intended. She felt slightly embarrassed for placing such a blunt order to a man his age.

“That was some fast service,” Daniel said with a grin.

“Really? You haven’t seen anything yet,” Oscar replied, smiling.

Like a sudden gust of wind, he was back behind the bar—only to reappear a second later, returning to their table with two bowls of nuts. This time, he set them down in front of them.

Daniel and Olivia stared, their mouths slightly open. Neither of them knew what to say. They simply sat there, frozen in shock.

“You must be the new interns,” Oscar said, flashing them a knowing smile. “You’ll see a lot more unusual abilities around here.”

For a moment, Daniel found himself lost in thought, staring at the old man. What fear had given him this kind of speed?

Just then, Olivia lifted her glass and sniffed the liquid inside.

“What is this?” she asked.

“That’s rum. But not like the ones you know—Comet Rum. I hope you enjoy it. It’s the strongest drink in the city. But be careful—it might bring back some memories.”

Before they could respond, the old man vanished in the blink of an eye—reappearing behind the counter once more.

Daniel grabbed a few nuts from the bowl and popped them into his mouth.

“Real nuts. He could’ve brought out insect shells instead,” he muttered.

Under Olivia’s curious gaze, he casually stuffed a handful into his pocket.

“For when the food sucks and I need something to hold me over,” he said, flashing her a wink.

Olivia still hadn’t fully shaken off her anger. Her attention drifted away from Daniel’s snack hoarding and back to the Comet Rum in front of her.

She took her first sip—

—and let out a small whimper between her lips. Taking a deep breath, she clutched her chest.

“It burns,” was all she managed to say, struggling to steady her voice.

Daniel hesitated, unsure if he should take a sip himself. But when he felt Olivia’s gaze on him, he realized he didn’t really have a choice. Maybe this was a good way to break the tension between them.

Lifting his glass, he took what he thought was a bold sip.

The bitter sting on his tongue and throat was tolerable, at least at

first.

But the moment the drink hit his stomach, his eyes widened. It was the same sensation he had felt a week ago—the night he crashed his motorcycle.

His chest became a raging wildfire, and his head felt like a thunders was ripping through it.

With a hoarse voice, he gasped, “This stuff is poison.”

Olivia’s irritated expression softened as she watched Daniel suffer. The corners of her lips curled into a sly smile.

“That’s all?” she teased.

Her smirk had taken complete control of him. The burning in his chest, the thunders in his skull—none of it had faded. But neither had the fluttering sensation in his stomach.

Ignoring the blaring warning bells in his mind, Daniel wrapped his fingers around the still-half-full glass. He never broke eye contact. His hands acted on their own, refusing to listen to reason.

In one swift motion, he downed the rest of the drink.

Olivia’s eyes widened as she watched him gulp it all down. She hadn’t expected him to take it that far.

A laugh bubbled up inside her, and this time, she didn’t hold it back. She liked the attention from someone this young, and she certainly wasn’t about to stop enjoying herself.

The moment the liquor hit his system, he broke eye contact. His eyes squeezed shut in pure agony.

He wanted to scream—

—but it felt like his vocal cords had melted.

His mouth opened, but no sound came out. Then, his eyes shot open again, and a choked, half-whimper, half-cry escaped him. Tears welled up and spilled down his now-mottled purple face.

“Are you okay?” she asked, grabbing his arm.

Olivia was barely holding in her laughter as she watched him sway slightly in his chair.

Daniel was in no condition to answer that question. All he could do was shake his head in a weak no.

He felt so awful that if he even tried to speak, he was convinced flames would shoot out of his mouth.

***

For about ten minutes, they waited for Daniel’s color and voice to return, hoping the effects of the drink would wear off. The next twenty minutes were filled with Olivia’s relentless teasing and nonstop jokes.

As their conversation carried on with laughter and playful

mockery, Daniel suddenly straightened in his chair, his expression turning serious.

"Are you sure?" he asked, locking eyes with Olivia.

"What?" Olivia blinked in surprise.

"Are you sure you want to leave?"

She leaned forward, pulling her chair slightly closer. She lowered her voice to almost a whisper.

"You have no idea how valuable this story is. I could become one of the most famous journalists in the world," she said, her eyes shining with excitement as she imagined the recognition and awards she would receive.

Daniel nodded, but deep down, he felt uneasy.

"What if you stayed until the training was over? I mean… for your sake. You could gather more news," he said, watching her hopefully.

If she was going to leave, at least he could try to buy more time—more time to be with her.

Olivia immediately caught on to the disappointment in his voice and his true motive. She placed her hand over his on the table.

"I can't stay away from my family for a year, Daniel," she said.

Her eyes grew misty. She wanted this story more than anything—

—but she wanted to see her family even more.

"Are you married?" he blurted out, his voice tinged with disappointment.

She let out an unexpected laugh. Even in her emotional state, he somehow managed to amuse her.

"No, I got divorced years ago," she said, shaking her head. Then, in a softer tone, she added, "My mom, my dad, my brother… I can't leave them without a word for a whole year."

"So, how are you going to do it?"

"Leader Glisson."

Daniel stared at her in confusion. "You're going to tell Leader Glisson you want to leave?"

"No—he's coming."

Right then, the creaking doors of Fast Cups swung open.

Lando Glisson stepped inside and, without hesitation, headed straight for their table.

Without giving either of them a chance to speak, he pulled out an empty chair and sat down. Fixing each of them with an intense stare, he said,

"Everything we discuss at this table stays at this table. And don't just keep it out of the main building—don't speak a word of it beyond this very door."

Daniel and Olivia nodded silently.

Once Glisson had their agreement, he continued,

“We’re all going to forget what Daniel did during the mission. No one will ever know about this.”

Daniel eyed Glisson with suspicion.

“Why are we keeping it a secret, Leader Glisson?”

Glisson leaned in slightly, lowering his voice.

“No intern in Nivorum has ever used a weapon before. Even heirs don’t learn how until years later. What you did… was highly unusual.”

“So… did I break the rules?” Daniel asked nervously.

“It’s not that simple,” Glisson said, his tone serious.

“Seeing in the dark, sensing someone’s presence… These are transformations of your fears. It happens because of the damage Halley’s effect has done to the amygdala in your brain.”

Daniel was fully focused, trying to process every word. Olivia, on the other hand, was committing every sentence to memory—storing it for her future news report.

Before either of them could ask a question, Glisson continued.

“Creating a weapon only happens when your bond with your symbol is flawless. If Holloway or Sylvester had realized you could summon a weapon, the consequences would have been… unpleasant.”

“What kind of consequences?” Daniel asked.

“You’re better off not knowing.”

“But I don’t even understand how I created it,” Daniel said, his voice laced with worry. “It was like… my body wasn’t mine.”

Olivia sat there, watching the conversation unfold like an intense table tennis match, not daring to blink.

Glisson locked eyes with Daniel.

“Your symbols are incredibly powerful. Once the bond between you is complete, it can control you. Make decisions for you. Show you things you can’t see. But…”

He paused for a moment, carefully choosing his next words.

“It won’t always make you do the right thing, Daniel. And you… you have more than you should. That’s not a good thing. Because that power… led to the death of an innocent.”

Daniel’s face turned ghostly pale. His wide eyes locked onto Glisson in shock.

The word innocent echoed in his head.

For Leader Glisson to describe the person he had killed that way—

—it weighed on him like a dark shadow pressing down on his chest.

The burning sting of the rum he had just drunk was nothing compared to the crushing heaviness now suffocating his heart.

And from the depths of that darkness, something inside him snapped.

“That’s bullshit!” Daniel suddenly shouted.

A few customers in the bar turned their heads toward their table.

A heavy tension settled over Fast Cups.

A new intern raising his voice at someone like Lando Glisson—one of Nivorum’s most important leaders—wasn’t something anyone expected to see.

But Glisson remained perfectly calm.

He raised a hand toward the other patrons, signaling that there was no problem.

Then, he turned his attention back to the table.

“He was innocent,” he said, emphasizing each word. “He had no intention of harming Olivia.”

As Glisson’s composure spread through the Fast Cups, the tension slowly dissipated.

The customers lowered their heads and returned to their drinks.

Olivia nodded slightly.

“If he wanted to, he had plenty of time. He was reaching toward me—to pull me to safety,” she said.

She had realized this since yesterday.

The man who had emerged from behind the rock—she had felt his presence, sensed that his intentions weren’t malicious. That was why she had cried when she looked at his body.

Daniel’s eyes slowly filled with tears. His throat tightened, and he swallowed hard.

He looked at Olivia.

“He was going to hurt you,” he said, his voice breaking.

The words came out in fragments, unsteady and unsure.

Olivia shook her head.

“Daniel… I don’t think he was. I’m sorry.”

Glisson stood up and placed a firm yet gentle hand on Daniel’s shoulder.

“Don’t let the past consume you, Daniel. You can’t change it.”

Daniel said nothing. His lips refused to move. His gaze remained locked on the floor, his body frozen in place.

Glisson turned to Olivia.

“Take him home. This won’t be easy to process.”

Then, without another word, he quietly disappeared through the door behind the bar.

Olivia watched him leave, then turned back to Daniel, studying him with concern.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

For the first time, she noticed how empty and lifeless his once-admiring eyes had become.

“Come on, let’s get some air,” she said.

She stepped away from the table, expecting him to follow.

As they walked out into Nivorum Square, the freezing air hit their faces like a blade.

And that was exactly what Olivia had hoped for.

She thought the cold might bring Daniel back to himself, even just a little.

But Daniel was carrying a fire inside him so fierce—

—he was completely numb to the world outside.

***

When the thirteenth floor's elevator doors slid open, Brenda was already standing in the middle of the corridor, waiting.

The moment she saw Daniel and Olivia arm in arm, her brows furrowed. But as soon as she noticed the emptiness in Daniel's eyes—like he had been lost in some endless void—she sprinted toward them.

"What happened? Is he okay? Daniel! Are you okay?"

Brenda bombarded them with questions, panicked, as she took Daniel's other arm.

Still moving forward with half-conscious steps, Daniel barely registered their presence. Olivia, trying to help him toward living quarters 133, kept her voice calm.

"Long story. Let's get him home first."

They opened the door and eased Daniel onto the large couch.

Brenda sat beside him immediately, still holding onto his arm. Her anxious eyes darted to Olivia.

"What's wrong with him? Did something happen?"

Taking a deep breath, Olivia settled into the chair by the desk.

"He learned a truth too heavy for him to bear."

Brenda's insistent gaze bore into her, but Olivia only sighed.

"I can't be the one to tell you, Brenda. I'm sorry."

"She knows. You can just say it—I'm a murderer."

Daniel's voice was flat, his eyes locked onto the wall across from him. He didn't move. He barely even blinked.

Brenda's pupils widened. For a moment, she was unable to process what she had just heard.

She found herself slowly leaning away from him, unconsciously shifting on the couch. Her grip on his arm slackened.

She was about to pull away completely—

—when Olivia noticed.

Brenda was hesitating, withdrawing. She was afraid.

"He's not a murderer," Olivia said, her voice firm.

Brenda's eyes flicked rapidly between Daniel and Olivia.

"Yesterday, he said he killed an enemy in the firefight," she

murmured, unsure.

"Yes. Same thing."

Though they were alone in the living quarters, Olivia lowered her voice.

"But the person he killed wasn't dangerous."

Brenda shook her head, panicked.

"No! The news said someone was killed while you were defending yourselves! And Daniel said that man was going to hurt you."

Olivia let out a slow breath.

She started recounting everything as she had experienced it—the way she had sensed the man's presence, how she had realized his intentions weren't hostile, and how, during her extra training with Heir Cooper, she had been learning to perceive people's true intentions.

Daniel inhaled sharply, the weight of killing an innocent crushing him all over again.

He still refused to meet their eyes, still stared at the wall, like facing the truth was sucking the life out of him.

Brenda felt an internal conflict growing inside her.

One part of her knew Daniel would never have killed anyone on purpose. He had only been trying to protect his friend.

But another part of her felt something inside had shifted. A wall had cracked.

Daniel was miserable. Regret was eating him alive. But despite that, she couldn't shake the strange energy she felt from him.

"It was a reflex, wasn't it, Daniel? You said you didn't think before you acted."

Daniel only nodded.

That was all he could do.

"Leader Glisson said no intern has ever…"

Olivia stopped herself abruptly.

A sharp memory flashed in her mind—Glisson's warning at Fast Cups.

This conversation could not be overheard. She didn't want to be the one spilling details and getting herself into trouble.

Brenda stared at Olivia, expecting her to continue.

But before Olivia could say anything, a sudden knock at the door made them all flinch.

It wasn't Daniel's living quarters. It was Brenda's.

Brenda swallowed hard. She already knew who was standing on the other side.

Her fingers, still lightly touching Daniel's arm, tensed. Then, as if realizing it too late, she quickly pulled away from him.

Her body stiffened at the edge of the couch, and her skin took on

its usual ghostly pale shade.

Olivia noticed Brenda's visible fear.

In a low voice, she muttered, "He's coming."

"Open the door! Are you two together again?"

Sylvester's voice rang through the corridor, each word laced with irritation.

The pounding on the door grew louder by the second.

Olivia glanced at the two people in front of her.

Brenda was paralyzed with fear.

Daniel—completely weighed down by guilt.

Taking a deep breath, Olivia rose from her seat and slipped on her usual confidence like a shield.

Then, she opened the door.

Sylvester, clearly not expecting to see her standing there, faltered for a split second. For just a moment, he froze.

But the hesitation lasted barely an instant before the familiar coldness returned to his sharp, ice-blue eyes.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, his tone harsh.

"Did I need permission?" Olivia quipped, her voice laced with sarcasm.

Sylvester's gaze bore into her, but not even the slightest crack appeared in her confidence.

His eyes flared with anger.

He wasn't used to an intern speaking back to him.

"How dare you talk back to me?"

Behind them, Brenda shrank even further into the couch, while Daniel was drowning in something entirely different.

A deep, boiling rage was rising inside him.

"I wasn't talking back. I just asked a question," Olivia said smoothly, not a single tremor in her voice.

She met Sylvester's glare head-on.

"Are we required to ask for permission before visiting our friends?"

"No, we're not."

Sylvester's tone was clipped, as if he wanted to end the conversation as soon as possible. But the growing fury inside him was clear on his face.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll be taking my intern. Brenda, come here."

Olivia could feel the darkness radiating from Sylvester. It was suffocating.

"We're in the middle of a conversation. I don't think she wants to go."

"If I say she's coming, then she's coming!" Sylvester snapped, his voice exploding with anger.

Then, without warning, he shoved Olivia aside, his fingers brushing against her bare shoulder.

The moment she felt his touch, a shudder of disgust rippled through her.

She recoiled as if a diseased, rotting hand had brushed against her, her skin crawling.

Fixing him with an icy glare, she took another step back, revulsion tightening in her chest.

“Don’t ever touch me again,” she said coldly.

But Sylvester ignored her completely. His attention snapped back to Brenda, his voice rising once more.

“Now! I told you to get up!”

Brenda noticed Daniel’s hand.

Fingers clenched tight against the edge of the couch, knuckles turning a bone-white shade.

She could feel the storm raging inside him. His burning desire to lunge at Sylvester. To tear him apart.

He was seconds away from losing control.

To stop him from making a reckless move, Brenda quickly got up from the couch and stepped toward the door.

“Good,” Sylvester murmured, watching her approach with satisfaction. A twisted, ugly smirk stretched across his lips.

“Enjoy your little get-together.”

Brenda stepped outside, and Sylvester followed close behind, walking slowly. Deliberately.

Then, with a sharp flick of his wrist, he slammed the door shut behind him.

For a while, neither Daniel nor Olivia spoke.

They both knew—Brenda had to be saved from this.

But neither of them had the slightest clue how.

CHATPER V

ACADEMY

The new week in Nivorum had started on a bitter note for the residents of the thirteenth floor.

Daniel was still unable to shake off the crushing weight of taking a life.

Brenda was worn down by Sylvester's relentless pressure.

Olivia felt the weight of being away from both her job and her family growing heavier by the day, pulling her deeper into a state of despair.

Meanwhile, Kevin, feeling completely sidelined by the troubles of those around him, spent most of his time with the leaders and heirs rather than the other interns.

***

When Daniel stepped into the training room, a shiver ran through his entire body.

The box he had been stepping into every day for the past week now looked even more terrifying. The last time, he had compared it to a coffin. Now, his mind conjured an even worse image—he imagined the innocent person he had killed lying inside it.

The thought sent a tingling sensation through his skull, and his stomach churned.

"Move it!" Leader Holloway's voice snapped through the room, directed at the intern who had been standing frozen for nearly two minutes.

Daniel swallowed hard, the sound unnervingly loud in the silence. He tried to focus on Holloway's voice, but his mind refused to cooperate.

The moment he took a step toward the box, the vision hit him.

The man he had killed was lying inside. His eyes were wide open, his face frozen in pure terror.

"Stop! Don't do it! I was only trying to help!" the corpse screamed.

Daniel's hands flew to his head, fingers tangling in his messy hair as he fell to his knees. His body trembled, rocking back and forth as tears streamed down his face.

Holloway had no idea what was happening. He rushed toward his intern, who had collapsed on the floor without warning.

Daniel's voice barely came out—a hoarse, broken whisper.

"He's here… in the coffin."

Holloway stared at him, trying to piece together what he was saying.

"Who? What coffin?" he asked, his voice laced with confusion.

***

Evening in the lounge area was quieter than ever.

Daniel sat slumped on the couch, his head bowed, convinced he didn't even deserve to take part in a conversation.

Brenda appeared buried in a book she had borrowed from the library, but everyone in the room knew she wasn't actually reading. She had been staring at the same page for nearly twenty minutes.

Kevin, as usual, sat in the farthest corner, sketching something. He was drawing a burning wooden house.

The heavy silence was finally broken by Olivia.

"Snap out of it already. Alright, Daniel's punishing himself for something he's not even guilty of, but what about you?"

Her gaze was fixed on Brenda, who was using the book as a shield.

Brenda glanced up briefly over the top of her glasses before sighing deeply.

"Sylvester," she muttered under her breath. But almost immediately after, she shook her head.

"No. I don't want to talk about it." She dove back into the pages.

"I'm leaving," Olivia said, her tone firm.

Kevin, not bothering to lift his head from his drawing, lazily waved a hand.

"See you tomorrow."

"No. I mean I'm leaving Nivorum."

Daniel slowly lifted his head. Brenda's glasses reappeared over the top of her book. Kevin put his pencil down.

Now, all eyes were on Olivia.

"I have to go back. My family, my job, my responsibilities—I can't just sit here doing nothing."

"They won't let you," Brenda said, her tone far from hopeful. Truthfully, she wanted nothing more than to leave as well, to get away from Sylvester. But she knew that wasn't an option.

"But we have to do something. Don't you miss your families?" Olivia asked, scanning their faces.

"No," Kevin said, picking up his pencil again. "They send me off to camps and courses all the time. I'm used to it."

"I hate my father. And my mother's been gone for a long time," Daniel added, his voice barely above a whisper.

The mention of his mother sent a painful sting through his chest.

Olivia turned to Brenda, hoping for some kind of agreement.

Brenda closed her book and took a deep breath.

"My parents… I lost them in a fire four years ago."

The words felt like thorns in her throat. Her honey-colored eyes glistened as she fought back tears.

"I'm sorry," Olivia said softly, unsure of what else to say. A few minutes passed in silence.

Kevin stared at the drawing in front of him. After hearing Brenda's story, he slowly pulled a blank sheet of paper over the burning house he had sketched.

It had been a coincidence, but he didn't want her to see it and feel even worse.

Finally, Olivia spoke again.

"I'm going to make a plan to get out of here. But I can't do it alone. I need help."

***

When the weekend mission announcement was made, far more hands went up this time.

The moment Olivia heard they would be returning to the Old World, her hand shot into the air. She saw this as an opportunity to reunite with her family. If the gateway opened somewhere more central this time, she could slip away easily.

Seeing Olivia volunteer made Daniel react instinctively. After everything that had happened, volunteering hadn't even crossed his mind. But knowing Olivia planned to use this mission as her escape, he raised his hand—not to join out of duty, but either to stop her or, if she really was going to leave, to be there for her in her final moments in Nivorum. It was a decision made not with logic, but with emotion.

Brenda, noticing Daniel's raised hand, immediately volunteered as well. The worry she had felt for him all week hadn't faded. If he faced something similar to what happened last time, she knew he wouldn't recover from it. She needed to be by his side—to stop him if necessary.

Kevin, meanwhile, barely paid attention to the conversation. As usual, he was focused on his drawings. Last week, it had been made crystal clear that he wasn't allowed to participate in missions. So, he had no reason to care.

This time, he was sketching a man kneeling, shielding the crowd behind him from enemy fire.

"Tomorrow's mission won't take place in open terrain—it will be among people," Holloway announced to the interns. "We will be

attending an auction. I expect everyone to act naturally and avoid any suspicious behavior."

Then, his gaze locked onto Olivia. His voice took on an even more commanding tone.

"And I assume none of you will be making unnecessary conversation… or looking for adventure."

Everyone nodded in agreement, acknowledging Leader Holloway's words.

But Olivia felt a sharp tension rising in her chest. The way Holloway had singled her out made her feel as if the warning had been directed specifically at her.

Did he know? Had he somehow figured out her plan?

She instinctively tried to read Holloway's energy, searching for an indication of his true intentions—was he a threat to her or not?

But nothing worked. Her abilities were only effective on people she couldn't physically see.

Against Holloway, she was completely blind.

***

After the leaders and heirs left the meeting room, Olivia leaned forward in her chair. In a quiet yet determined voice, she said, "I'm leaving tomorrow."

Brenda, just as she had before, sighed and muttered, "They won't let you." Her tone was filled with resignation.

"I'm not asking for permission," Olivia replied firmly. "If we're going to an auction, that means there will be police officers and a crowd."

Kevin, his eyes widening in shock, stared at her.

"Are you going to report them to the police?" he asked, incredulous.

Olivia placed a reassuring hand on Kevin's arm.

"No," she said gently. "But as long as the police are there, they can't drag me back by force. They can't hurt me in public."

Daniel took a deep breath and nodded slightly.

"So, nothing we say will change your mind, will it?" he asked, searching Olivia's eyes for a final glimmer of hesitation.

"You already know the answer," she replied with a slight tilt of her head and a soft smile.

She could see the disappointment on his face and didn't want to make it any worse.

Daniel lowered his gaze for a moment before nodding.

"If it'll make you happier…"

Olivia's smile widened, becoming more genuine.

“It will.”

“And how exactly do you plan to do this?” Brenda cut in, her voice sharper now.

She could sense the weight in Daniel’s mind, the lingering impact of last week’s events. More than that, she could feel the way his thoughts were beginning to drift, his emotions toward Olivia leading him down an uncertain path.

Lowering her already hushed voice, Olivia explained, “I’ll wait until the end of the auction. When the crowd starts moving toward the exit, if anybody create a distraction…”

Before she could finish, Daniel interrupted.

“Fine,” he said, trying to mask the sadness in his voice. “I’ll do it.”

***

The next morning, as they all walked toward the gateway, each intern moved alongside their assigned leader or heir. Holloway and Daniel led the group, followed closely by Sylvester and Brenda. Behind them, Cooper and Olivia walked side by side.

Unlike their previous mission, they were dressed in Nivorum formal attire this time. Brenda had been in low spirits since breakfast because of it. She could feel Sylvester’s eyes constantly on her, and with every step, her discomfort grew.

One by one, they entered the small, single-story building. The same old man stood waiting at the gateway, as prepared as ever. He gave a slight bow to Holloway’s group in greeting.

Before the man could speak, Holloway tapped a few points on the transparent tablet in his hand. A yellow light shot from the tablet’s screen, streaming into the control panel before the old man. The man nodded in approval.

“The gateway is ready, sir,” he murmured.

Keeping their formation, they proceeded toward the glowing ring in the dark corridor.

As the last one to step through, Olivia felt a strange mix of excitement and hope as gravity took hold of her again. The familiar scent of paper, leather, and dust filled her nose, wrapping around her like a long-lost memory. The moment she opened her eyes, she recognized the City Library’s attic floor.

This was the same gateway they had used to enter Nivorum—and the exact place she had hoped to return to.

Daniel had completed his transition first. He turned to Olivia, knowing exactly what was on her mind. Her determination to escape had been clear since their last mission, and now, as he saw the happiness on her face, he knew for sure.

Today, it would all end.

"No one is to disrupt the natural flow of events," Holloway reminded them once again. Then, turning specifically to Brenda and Olivia, he added, "You will follow your heirs' instructions without question."

Brenda felt her stomach churn at Holloway's words. She already had no choice but to obey Sylvester's every demand out of fear—hearing the same command from someone else only made her feel more disgusted.

But Olivia? She wasn't listening.

Being back in this library, a place she had visited since childhood, made her feel at home. Just a few blocks away was the newspaper office where she worked. As soon as she stepped outside, she was certain she could reclaim her old life.

They descended from the dusty attic using the creaky wooden staircase. At the bottom, two men in long coats stood by a sliding door. As they pulled it open, a cold gust of wind rushed inside.

Outside, heavy rain poured down, drumming against the ground just beyond the doorway. The rhythmic patter of the downpour echoed faintly through the library's dim corridors.

"This doesn't feel like August rain," Olivia whispered, staring outside. She had lived in this city her entire life, and she had never seen rainfall like this in the summer.

"Because it's not," Brenda answered from just behind her.

Seeing Olivia's curious yet bewildered expression, she subtly gestured toward something outside.

Olivia followed Brenda's gaze and looked toward one of the city's landmarks—a tall building that served as a well-known symbol of the city. Its rooftop display always projected the date and time in photon lights, visible even under the murkiest skies.

Today was no different—at least for everyone except those who had come from Nivorum.

She couldn't believe what she was seeing.

Stepping forward instinctively, she moved closer, trying to get a clearer view. She nearly stepped between Daniel and Leader Holloway, who stood near the threshold of the library's entrance.

The rooftop display read: *December 3, 2061*.

***

Though they were slightly damp from the rain, they exited through the back door and circled around to the grand entrance of the library.

As they stepped inside, soft classical music greeted their ears. White-gloved, impeccably dressed attendants bowed respectfully and

ushered them in.

Following the red carpet that stretched just beyond the entrance, they walked toward the library's grand hall.

Standing in the center of the spacious hall, they took in the sight of pristine white walls and an intricate network of geometrically arranged staircases that gave the space the appearance of an elaborate labyrinth.

The library's three floors rose in elegant balcony-style tiers, reaching all the way up to the dusty attic floor they had arrived in. From this vantage point, however, it looked nothing like an old attic—only a ceiling adorned with magnificent chandeliers and modern architectural design.

Towering shelves lined every wall, though the ancient printed books they once housed had long since been replaced with digital archives.

Tonight, the City Library's hall had been transformed into a banquet space. Tables, meticulously arranged for the guests, all faced a stage draped in red curtains.

They split into pairs, taking seats at different tables.

Holloway and Daniel sat at a table farther from the stage. Brenda and Sylvester were positioned closer to the center, while Cooper and Olivia had been seated almost directly in front of the stage.

As soon as Olivia stepped out of the building, she had considered walking in a different direction. But when her eyes caught the date displayed on the rooftop once more, she hesitated.

If it was correct, she needed to understand how it was possible. Her plan would have to wait.

The moment she sat down at her table, she discreetly glanced at the fur-clad woman beside her, catching a glimpse of her phone screen.

The date read December 3rd—a second confirmation. The confusion in her mind deepened.

It had only been two weeks since they were taken to Nivorum. By her estimate, today should have been somewhere around August 20th.

Heir Cooper sat beside her, but since they were sharing the table with other guests, she couldn't voice the questions swirling in her mind.

At that moment, a man in an immaculate white suit stepped onto the stage. He appeared to be in his early fifties, and as he greeted the audience with a polite nod, his calm, composed demeanor commanded the room's attention.

After a brief introduction, he began explaining the rules of the auction.

"Why are we here?" Daniel asked in a hushed voice.

Without taking his eyes off the stage, Holloway replied, “There’s something we need to acquire.” Then, after a pause, his gaze shifted toward one of the tables across the room.

“And this time, we can’t leave without it.”

Daniel turned his head carefully, following Holloway’s line of sight.

His stomach twisted when he saw the same heavyset man from the previous mission, seated at one of the tables.

The moment Daniel recognized him, every painful memory he had tried to suppress surged back into his mind.

The weight of taking a life had already settled on him like an immovable stone. But now, sitting in the same room as someone connected to the man he had killed, that guilt burrowed even deeper.

Daniel knew the man wasn’t alone. And if someone else in this room had witnessed what happened that day, the thought sent a fresh wave of unease through him.

He dropped his gaze, trying to avoid everyone’s eyes. The discomfort clawing at his chest made it feel like the entire room was watching him.

Twenty minutes into the auction, a digital model was brought onto the stage. The man in the white suit pressed a button on his remote, activating the display. A holographic projection of a small, wooded plot of land flickered into existence.

“That’s the one,” Holloway murmured, eyes fixed on the stage.

“It was heavily exposed to stardust during Halley’s passage. We need that land.” His voice dropped to a whisper.

Daniel didn’t fully understand why, but he simply nodded. Still, his eyes drifted back to the heavyset man.

The moment their gazes met, his heart pounded violently against his ribs. He quickly looked away, forcing himself to focus elsewhere.

This time, his eyes landed on Brenda’s table.

Sylvester was seated right beside her, his arm casually draped over her shoulders. In his other hand, he raised a bidding paddle, placing an offer on the land being auctioned.

Brenda’s strained smile did little to conceal her discomfort. Her body was rigid, and though she tried to maintain her composure, the unease in her eyes was painfully clear.

Bidding paddles rose across the room, driving the price higher and higher. As the value increased, fewer and fewer hands remained in the game.

Soon, only three bidders were left: Sylvester, Cooper, and the heavyset man.

After Sylvester placed his bid, Daniel’s eyes drifted back to the heavyset man. The man shook his head slowly, exhaling as he set his

bidding paddle down on the table. The disappointment on his face was unmistakable.

Holloway grinned, savoring his triumph. He reached for his paddle, lifting it for the first time—drunk on victory, reveling in his success.

The suited man invited Malcolm Holloway to the stage as the new owner of the wooded land.

Holloway, with his cane in hand and hat perched neatly on his head, strode forward. As he passed by Cooper and Olivia's table, he cast a glance their way, giving his cane a subtle swing before continuing on.

Once on stage, he shook hands with the presenter, and the flashes of cameras erupted in rapid succession.

Daniel noticed the chair beside him being pulled back.

The heavyset man he had spent the entire evening avoiding sat down in Holloway's empty seat—without asking, without a word.

"You're on the wrong side, kid," the man said, peering over his round sunglasses. "You killed one of my students last week."

Daniel felt as though the air had been sucked from his lungs. He tried to swallow, but his throat refused to cooperate.

The man pulled a pen from his pocket and lightly tapped it against Daniel's knee. A single drop of green ink dripped from its tip.

The moment the ink touched him, Daniel's eyelids became unbearably heavy. He fought to keep them open, but the weight was overwhelming. His vision darkened, and before he could resist, his eyes shut completely.

In the pitch-black void, the past week unraveled before him like a fast-forwarded film reel—training sessions, breakfasts, dinners, quiet moments in his living quarters… each memory flashing one after another.

Then, just as he reached that terrible moment—the instant he had fired his crossbow, the moment he had ended a man's life—everything suddenly froze.

Daniel braced himself to relive it again, but instead, the memory held still, frozen like a photograph. His surroundings shifted, pixelating into fragments before dissolving entirely.

When he opened his eyes, the chair beside him was empty.

The man had vanished.

Daniel's head snapped toward the man's previous table, but there was no sign of him.

"Andrew Hunt," he murmured under his breath.

The name surfaced in his mind like a whisper from deep within.

As soon as it did, a memory unfolded before his closed eyes.

"My name is Andrew Hunt," the man said, his voice calm and

steady. “I am the Principal of Luxsophis Academy.”

Behind Hunt, an ornate entrance loomed tall—an intricately carved gateway adorned with elegant patterns. Two towering spires flanked the entrance, their stone walls stretching high into the sky.

The air carried the scent of salt from the sea, mingled with the crisp, sweet breeze of spring.

This place was nothing like the oppressive atmosphere of Nivorum.

“Luxsophis Academy…” Daniel echoed, his gaze locked onto the towering gate in awe..

***

When the auction ended, the crowded hall stirred with movement. The sound of shifting chairs and footsteps echoed through the library. Sylvester and Brenda were making their way toward the table.

Daniel’s gaze, however, drifted to Olivia, seated at the farthest end of the room. Just as they had discussed the previous day, he needed to create a distraction—an opportunity for Olivia to slip away unnoticed.

He had taken on this task, yet the past few days of internal turmoil had left him unable to come up with a proper plan.

Then, he thought of the Comet Rum they had drunk at Fast Cups. He recalled its bitter taste and involuntarily grimaced.

Maybe he could draw attention to himself just as he had that night—wincing, groaning, making a scene.

“Don’t even think about it,” Holloway’s voice cut in, sharp and unwavering.

“We’re not here for theatrics.”

Daniel froze. His plan died before it could even take form. He could do nothing but remain where he was, silent and still.

Moments later, Sylvester and Brenda reached their table, followed by Cooper and Olivia.

Daniel met Olivia’s gaze with an apologetic look. Deep down, a small part of him was relieved she hadn’t managed to escape.

“Don’t be selfish, Daniel,” Brenda whispered.

Olivia beamed.

“Well, aren’t we going home?” she asked in a cheerful tone.

Daniel and Brenda’s eyes widened instantly.

Olivia’s blatant mention of her escape plan left them in shock. They exchanged glances, completely at a loss for what to do.

“Of course we are, Intern Thompson,” Holloway replied, his smirk laced with mockery.

Sylvester’s lips curled into an equally twisted grin, mirroring his leader’s amusement.

“I already miss Nivorum,” Olivia added, her voice brimming with

enthusiasm.

Daniel and Brenda's worried expressions shifted into sheer confusion.

Olivia's apparent eagerness to return felt both absurd and completely unnatural.

Then, in that moment, Daniel noticed something—small yet deeply unsettling.

A detail so obvious that he couldn't believe he had overlooked it.

Her brown eyes were green.

Those green eyes didn't remind him of his ex-girlfriend, Emily.

Instead, they brought back memories of his former housemate, George—the moments when he had become nothing more than Holloway's puppet.

***

On the way back to Nivorum, Olivia talked incessantly.

She went on and on about how this city was the greatest opportunity they could ever have, praising the leaders and heirs for their dedication to making them better people.

Even when they reached their floor, Olivia's emerald-green eyes gleamed with an unnatural brightness, and she continued glorifying Nivorum.

The moment they stepped out of the elevator, Daniel spoke in a hurried tone.

"Come with me."

He didn't wait for Brenda or Olivia to ask questions before striding toward the library. Without hesitation, they followed.

As soon as they entered, Olivia looked around in awe.

"Let's appreciate this incredible space of knowledge they've provided for us."

Her voice carried a reverent admiration, as if she were under a spell.

"Please, just be quiet for a second," Daniel muttered, deliberately avoiding her gaze. Then, turning to Brenda, he said, "I need to tell you what happened."

The tension in his voice was undeniable.

"I know," Brenda replied calmly. "There's a barrier in her mind."

Daniel shot her a questioning look.

That was exactly what he was about to say.

And once again, Brenda had voiced it before he could.

Meanwhile, Olivia remained entirely unaware, still gazing around the library in admiration.

Brenda met Daniel's gaze.

"She's under the same influence as your friend," she said, summarizing the situation in a single sentence.

Daniel hesitated for a moment.

He couldn't remember whether he had ever told Brenda about what Holloway had done to George.

But right now, there was something far more important to discuss.

Pushing the thought aside, he pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Actually, there's something else," he said. "About the man I killed last week."

Brenda, intrigued, pulled out a chair and sat across from him, giving him her full attention.

"It's… hard to explain," Daniel admitted.

Brenda met his gaze.

For a few moments, neither of them spoke. The silence stretched between them.

Then, her eyes drifted to the symbol on his wrist.

"I think he's telling the truth. That day… you said you hadn't done it consciously."

Daniel took a deep breath, clearing his mind.

He focused on the image that Hunt had planted in his thoughts—the grand entrance to Luxsophis Academy.

Brenda's face lit up with wonder.

"It looks so peaceful," she said, smiling.

As the vision of Luxsophis Academy slowly faded from Daniel's mind, her voice echoed once more.

"I'm inside your mind. I can read it."

***

By the end of the past half-hour, everyone in the thirteenth-floor library was in a different state of mind.

Olivia's eyes had returned to their usual brown about ten minutes ago, but in that time, she had been on the verge of a full-blown breakdown. She paced furiously through the library, shouting at the top of her lungs, repeating the same words over and over:

"I was so close! I was home! I was about to see my family!"

Brenda, despite the chaos, had stacked a series of old, leather-bound books in front of her, poring over them in an attempt to gather information on Luxsophis Academy and the symbols.

Every time Olivia's voice rang out, she flinched, but she remained silent, fully aware of the weight of Olivia's frustration.

Daniel, meanwhile, was trying to process the fact that Brenda could read his thoughts while also wondering how to calm Olivia

down.

"Olivia, it's over," he said hesitantly.

Olivia whirled around to face him.

The unnatural green in her eyes was gone, but now her brown irises blazed with fury.

"Yes, it's over," she yelled. "And maybe I'll never get another chance like this again!"

Her voice echoed off the library walls.

"I'm sorry," Daniel said quietly.

That only made Olivia angrier. She took a sharp step toward him.

"No, you're not! In fact, you're happy about this! You're happy I'm still here, aren't you?!" she shouted.

Daniel froze at the accusation.

He hadn't even thought about it.

Hunt's words, the memories burned into his mind, Holloway's plans, Brenda's ability to read thoughts—so much had happened today that he hadn't even had time to process how he felt about Olivia staying or leaving.

"No. I… I wasn't happy about it," he said, his voice fragile.

"Shut up!" Olivia shouted.

Daniel stared at her, stunned and hurt by the sudden outburst.

Brenda turned slightly in her chair, quietly observing the exchange.

Olivia leaned in closer, her voice sharp, every word seemingly meant to wound him more.

"You said you'd help me! I hate you! I never want to see you again!"

Daniel's eyes welled up.

He had no idea how to respond.

He could only stand there, staring at the woman he admired, who now looked at him with furious, burning eyes.

"He tried," Brenda said, exhaling softly. "Leader Holloway knew what he was going to do and stopped him. It was Holloway who was controlling your mind."

Olivia's yelling stopped abruptly.

The anger on her face began to fade.

Daniel looked at her with quiet disappointment.

When he spoke, his voice wavered.

"I'm sorry you're stuck here, Olivia. I really did try."

He pushed back his chair and stood up.

"I won't get in your way again."

Before either Olivia or Brenda could say anything, he strode out of the library.

His heavy footsteps echoed down the corridor, followed by the

clang of the old elevator's metal gate as it shut behind him.

The two women sat in silence, glancing at each other as if trying to make sense of what had just happened.

***

"No," said Glisson, taking a slow sip from his beer before setting the bottle down on the table. "You can't transfer to another floor. And you certainly can't tell Leader Holloway about this."

Daniel took a sip from his own bottle, letting out a deep breath.

"You don't understand, Leader Glisson. I can't stay there any longer."

Glisson's tone softened, carrying a fatherly warmth.

"Listen, Daniel. When I look into your eyes, I can see the wound in your heart. I don't know which woman left that scar, but it's there, plain as day. Running away won't fix anything."

Daniel opened his mouth to protest, but Glisson silenced him with a look.

"I've been through the same thing. But I didn't run. Running is never the answer. The woman you care about may not be by your side, but if you truly love her, just seeing her should be enough. You need to stay where you are."

Slowly, Daniel nodded.

In Glisson's words, he found the fatherly guidance he had longed for all these years.

For a fleeting moment, he wished this man had been his father.

A faint smile crossed his lips. "Alright," he said. "If you think it's the right thing to do."

Glisson returned the smile with an approving nod.

At that moment, Daniel made up his mind—he would trust this man.

Breaking the silence, he leaned in slightly. "There's something else, Leader Glisson. Today, at the City Library, I met Hunt."

For a brief second, Glisson absorbed Daniel's words. Then, his expression hardened.

"Not now, Daniel," he said, glancing around cautiously. "Don't mention this to anyone. The time will come."

"Alright," Daniel obeyed.

The moment the words left his lips, the wooden door of Fast Cups burst open.

Leader Holloway's towering figure filled the entrance. His furious gaze swept across the entire place before locking onto Daniel.

"You're not supposed to be outside," he said, striding toward the table.

Daniel had no idea how to respond.

He considered a few excuses, but none seemed convincing enough to satisfy Holloway. So he chose to remain silent.

“He’s just confused,” Glisson said, nudging the empty chair beside him slightly back. “Won’t you sit down, Leader Holloway?”

Holloway didn’t answer, but the hardness in his eyes made his thoughts clear enough.

“He thought he had permission since he went on a mission with you today,” Glisson added with a slight smile. “I explained to him that his leave is for tomorrow.”

Holloway’s eyes flicked to the beer bottles on the table.

“Looks more like a reward than a warning,” he muttered with disdain.

“Well, he’s already outside,” Glisson said, his voice carrying a teasing warmth. “Since he made it this far, he might as well enjoy a beer, don’t you think?”

“No,” Holloway said sharply. “I’m taking you back to your living quarters. Get up.”

For a fleeting moment, Daniel’s gaze flickered to Leader Glisson.

The man gave him a small, approving nod.

Daniel rose to his feet. “I’m sorry, Leader Holloway…”

***

Holloway’s scolding didn’t stop for a single moment until they entered the main building and took the elevator up to the thirteenth floor.

Throughout the entire ride, he repeated over and over that Leader Glisson didn’t belong in Nivorum, that Daniel needed to stay away from him, and that he had to follow the city’s rules without exception.

He even warned that if he allowed Glisson to influence him, he would be doomed to a wretched life outside the city walls.

At the sound of the elevator’s arrival, Brenda and Olivia hurried out of the library.

The moment they saw Leader Holloway standing beside Daniel, they froze in place.

“Don’t let your friend go outside without permission again,” Holloway said in an irritated tone.

With a slowly push on Daniel’s shoulder, he guided him into the corridor.

Then, slamming the ground floor button forcefully, he yanked the doors shut.

“Your permission to go outside tomorrow is revoked. All of you.”

None of them cared about Holloway’s punishment.

“I’m sorry, Daniel,” Olivia said softly, regret clear in her voice.

“It doesn’t matter,” Daniel muttered, his tone tinged with disappointment.

“It does,” Olivia insisted. “I shouldn’t have doubted that you’d help me just to make me happy.”

“I’m sorry too. I couldn’t find any clues about the Academy or the symbols,” Brenda cut in, hoping to ease the tension in the corridor, even if just a little.

Daniel didn’t respond to Olivia.

He simply gave her a small nod before turning to Brenda.

“It would’ve been ridiculous for them to leave us with a library where we could access everything,” he said.

CHAPTER VI
TRANSFORMATION

The first week of September had passed in Nivorum.

Just as Holloway had said, they were neither allowed to go to Nivorum Square nor called for another outside mission. Outside of training hours, they remained confined to their floor.

In the time that had passed, Olivia had managed to earn Daniel's forgiveness.

Given his weakness for her, it hadn't been all that difficult.

Daniel's mind, however, was entirely consumed by the Academy.

Ever since Hunt's touch, the guilt he had felt over the person he killed had vanished as if cut away with a knife.

Those memories felt completely erased.

Brenda, on the other hand, hadn't been able to escape Sylvester's visits.

Though she despised being his plaything nearly every other day, she couldn't bring herself to speak up.

***

On the Monday that marked the start of their second month of training, everyone had taken their place in the meeting hall.

Leader Holloway pulled out his transparent-screen tablet and spent a moment reviewing his notes.

One by one, he met the gaze of each intern.

"Olivia Thompson… It seems you can sense approaching people in advance and distinguish their intentions," he said, lifting his eyes from the tablet to Olivia.

"And according to Heir Cooper's reports, you are far ahead of where you should be. There is no doubt that you will serve Nivorum in a highly esteemed position."

Olivia couldn't help but smile, giving a small nod of acknowledgment.

But in truth, her mind was set on escaping this place, not serving Nivorum.

Two weeks ago, Leader Holloway had discovered and dismantled her plan. Since then, she had been trying to appear as compliant as possible.

Holloway then turned to Kevin.

“You are on the verge of becoming a true asset, Kevin Danning. You are a long-term project for us.”

Kevin offered a faint smile and said, “Thank you.”

But inside, he was conflicted.

He still had no idea what his ability was—if he even had one at all.

While the others went off to their training sessions, he always found himself inside a machine.

For hours, he lay in the device as it captured and analyzed thousands of images of his brain.

The rest of his time was spent watching films—dozens of them, over and over.

But every single film was cut off halfway through, and he was asked to predict the ending.

He didn’t understand the purpose, but he had adapted to it quickly.

Leader Glisson watched the exchange between Holloway and Kevin with a sullen expression.

Kevin’s training had been handed over to the researchers, leaving Glisson without an intern of his own.

The situation irritated him immensely.

Holloway turned to his own intern, seated directly across from him.

The pride on his face blended seamlessly with the sense of accomplishment in his voice.

“And my intern, Daniel Milner… Perfect vision in the dark. You no longer need light.

However, during your training, I’ve noticed the emergence of a different fear within you.

Something beyond darkness.

Deeper.

More complex.

This could hold far more than it seems.”

“Thank you,” Daniel said quietly.

In truth, he knew exactly what that other fear was.

Even though Hunt’s touch had silenced the voice of his conscience, every time he entered the training box, he felt as if he were slipping into the body of the man he had killed— as if there were a bond between them he couldn’t sever.

Holloway finally turned his attention to Brenda.

He felt the need to glance at his notes again, exhaling deeply before shifting his gaze to Sylvester with a blank expression.

Then, he looked back down at the tablet.

“So, you no longer flinch at sudden noises. Congratulations,” Leader Holloway said to Brenda, his voice laced with disbelief and

mockery.

His eyes then flicked back to Sylvester.

"Heir Valtorin, are your training reports accurate? You marked *highly positive*."

"Yes, sir," Sylvester replied.

Holloway frowned.

"And in what way do you think Brenda Lewis's ability will be of any use to us?"

Sylvester hadn't expected that question.

Under normal circumstances, he knew he should have marked her ability as insignificant to Nivorum's interests.

But if Brenda was removed from the program, he would lose his favorite plaything.

He needed to ensure she stayed.

"If it develops a little more…"

He trailed off, unable to finish his sentence.

He had no real argument to defend her presence.

Brenda listened to the conversation with little concern.

Her mind was already working on another plan.

If she could keep her ability hidden, she knew she could free herself from Sylvester.

And she was remarkably good at it—so much so that even the friends she lived with on the same floor had no idea she could read minds.

The only person she had ever shared this secret with was Daniel.

"I'll deal with this later," Holloway said, shooting Sylvester a sharp look before turning his attention to Lando Glisson.

"Leader Glisson, you may make your announcement."

Glisson calmly took a sip of water before breaking the silence that filled the hall.

"As you enter your second month, we are transitioning into a new phase.

From now on, you will be allowed to visit Nivorum Square on weekends.

However, participation in all future missions will now be mandatory."

Delivering these two pieces of information together stirred mixed emotions among the interns.

Even the limited freedom of being able to step outside into Nivorum Square felt like something they had longed for.

But none of them truly wanted to work for Nivorum.

Glisson let his gaze sweep over the group before continuing.

"From this point on, you will train together.

Not only will you refine your existing abilities, but we will also

push you to develop new ones.

Our goal is to uncover your hidden fears and transform them into strengths.

Be prepared—this next phase will be far more intense."

***

After the meeting, the interns were led to the basement level of the main building for their first day of training.

The corridor they entered was damp and musty, lined with rusted pipes, dripping water, and moss-covered walls, resembling an underground vault.

Dim, flickering LED lights cast weak illumination along the edges, only deepening the oppressive darkness.

Each of the four interns was taken through a separate door and placed in individual rooms.

None of the rooms were lit; they were swallowed in complete darkness.

Thanks to his growing mastery of night vision, Daniel could see every detail of the stone chamber he had been placed in.

The room was quite small and completely empty. Directly across, there was a circular hole just wide enough for an arm to fit through

From deep within, a muffled, monotonous sound echoed faintly.

Holloway's powerful voice rang through the corridor:

"Turn on all the lights—except for Daniel's room!"

One by one, the rooms lit up.

The other interns could now see their surroundings clearly.

Tension gripped Olivia even tighter.

She felt someone approaching her room and immediately realized their intentions were not good.

Her eyes locked onto the door.

At first, she expected Sylvester to walk in.

But within moments, she realized that the ominous presence wasn't coming from the entrance—it was coming from the dark hole right in front of her.

"Watch the holes!" she shouted, warning the others.

In each of the four rooms, the muffled sound grew louder.

The air turned frigid, and an icy chill seeped into the stone walls.

Their breaths became visible as faint clouds of vapor.

Then, something heavy dropped from the darkness of each hole, landing on the ground with a resounding thud.

The noise echoed through all four rooms.

Olivia's disgusted gasp was loud enough for everyone to hear.

Kevin's scream, however, shook the entire corridor.

Daniel's eyes were drawn to the creature that had fallen into his room—a massive snake, its golden eyes gleaming in the dark.

Neither of them needed light to see the other.

Even in the pitch-black room, the shimmering scales of the serpent were strikingly vivid.

Daniel instinctively took a step back, unsure of what to do.

He had never seen a snake before.

He didn't even know if he was afraid of them.

The snake raised its head and began to slither forward.

Hissing softly, it closed the distance between them with alarming speed.

Daniel feared the snake was about to strike and took another step back.

Without realizing it, he began pacing in a circular motion around the room, instinctively retreating.

For a brief moment, his hand darted toward the symbol on his wrist—he considered summoning a weapon.

But then, Glisson's warning echoed in his mind.

Besides, he wasn't entirely sure how to do it yet.

Kevin's terrified screams rang through the corridors, reverberating against the stone walls.

Then, Holloway's commanding voice cut through the chaos:

"Increase the level!"

For the briefest moment, a green shimmer pulsed along the snake's scales, traveling from its head to its tail.

The creature slithered forward as if obeying Holloway's command.

Then, a second snake dropped from the hole, landing with a heavy thud.

The entire floor echoed with Kevin's panicked shriek once more.

Daniel was trapped between the two snakes, his back pressed against the wall.

He had no idea how to defend himself.

The serpents moved in perfect sync, as if following a carefully orchestrated plan.

They slithered toward him, their bodies undulating with eerie precision.

One of them coiled toward his shoe, gliding over the skin.

Disgusted, Daniel jerked his leg, trying to shake it off.

But instead of retreating, the snake tightened its grip, wrapping itself more firmly around his calf.

His heartbeat pounded so violently in his chest that he could barely hear the hissing anymore.

From behind the door, Holloway's next order rang out:

"Increase it further."

Once again, the snakes' scales flickered with a strange, glowing light.

But this time, their movements became even more aggressive.

The one wrapped around Daniel's leg constricted tighter, cutting off circulation as it coiled higher.

The second snake lifted its head, poised to strike.

A surge of fear erupted inside Daniel.

He thrashed helplessly, struggling to breathe.

Ice-cold sweat trickled down from his scalp to his face.

His chest was beginning to tighten.

This time, Leader Holloway shouted,

"That's enough!"

The snakes' scales shimmered once again.

This time, the light traveled from their tails to their heads.

In an instant, both of them slithered away from Daniel, retreating back into the hole they had emerged from.

All the lights in the rooms went out, and the doors swung wide open.

Kevin was the first to step outside.

The small boy was breathless from fear, his hands, feet, and even his lips trembling uncontrollably.

He collapsed onto the damp floor and burst into tears.

"He has a severe fear of snakes," Leader Glisson remarked, his tone laced with disapproval.

"We're adding it to the training program."

A look of unease crossed Glisson's face, betraying his discontent with the harsh methods they used.

He had rejoined the training of interns with the new term, yet seeing Kevin in this state unhappy him.

Moments later, Daniel rushed into the corridor.

He hadn't spent much time with the younger boy, but seeing him so terrified and helpless wrenched at his heart.

The sight of Kevin's trembling body and the sheer terror on his face made Daniel momentarily forget his own fear entirely.

Holloway, in a remarkably calm tone, said, "His fear wasn't of the snake, but of a potential attack." He quickly noted something down on the transparent tablet in his hand.

Daniel stared blankly at his leader's face, trying to decipher the meaning behind those words—but he simply couldn't understand.

A few seconds later, Olivia burst out of her room, fury plain on her face. Her brows were furrowed, and she was practically fuming. The moment she stepped into the corridor, she didn't give anyone a chance to speak before shouting, "Are you trying to kill us?! What do you think you're doing?!"

“Please watch your tone, Miss Thompson,” Timothy Cooper said, maintaining his composure. Rather than getting angry at his intern’s outburst, he was trying to calm her down.

Despite Olivia’s sharp glare, Cooper continued addressing the leaders. “She’s more angry than afraid. If we keep pushing, she might improve, but in my personal opinion, it’s unnecessary.” As he finished speaking, he cast a somewhat apologetic glance at Olivia.

“So does she have a fear of snakes or not?” Holloway pressed.

Cooper replied, “Not enough to be worth addressing.”

They continued discussing the matter among themselves for a while. Cooper argued that Olivia’s fear was too insignificant to warrant training, while Holloway insisted that even a minor fear should be confronted.

For about five minutes, they went back and forth, neither willing to back down. When neither could sway the other, they agreed to set the matter aside for later evaluation.

“Brenda,” Daniel said, his voice tinged with concern as his eyes drifted toward her door.

A deep silence suddenly fell over the corridor. No one had noticed until that moment that Brenda still hadn’t come out. Not a single sound had come from her since they had entered the room.

Daniel couldn’t shake the thought that Brenda, who was scared of even the tiniest noise, might be in a far worse state after encountering the snakes. The idea pushed him into action. In an instant, he sprinted toward the open doorway of the stone chamber.

But suddenly, everything slowed.

It was as if he had stepped into a dream—time dragged in slow motion.

Three weeks ago, he had killed someone in an instinctive act to protect Olivia. Just like in that moment, his body now felt as though it wasn’t obeying him.

Sylvester’s threatening voice echoed down the corridor. “Stay where you are, Milner!”

Daniel heard the words clearly. His mind warned him that defying the order would have serious consequences. But his body paid no heed—it kept moving forward.

Seconds stretched into what felt like minutes as he burst into Brenda’s dark training room. His mouth fell open, eyes widening in shock. A deep sense of disgust rose within him once more.

Brenda was sitting on the floor against the wall. But this time, she looked more at peace than she had in a long while.

Her left arm was raised, allowing the snake to glide over the tattoos on her skin. The yellow-eyed creature coiled around her arm, its head resting lightly on the back of her hand while its tail curled

near her shoulder. Meanwhile, another snake lay curled in her lap, as docile as a tame cat, occasionally flicking its tongue as it settled comfortably.

Stammering slightly, dreading the answer, Daniel asked, “What… what are you doing?”

Brenda slowly turned her head, gazing into the darkness. Her voice was soft and serene. “Daniel? I was just… loving them.”

The realization that the word love had been spoken about a snake made Daniel’s stomach churn. Swallowing his unease, he muttered, “I thought something had happened to you.”

A wide, genuine smile spread across Brenda’s lips. “Were you worried about me?”

“We need to get out.”

Brenda nodded in understanding. With her free hand, she gently stroked the snake resting in her lap. The creature slithered down her leg at an unhurried pace, coiling along the floor before climbing up the wall and vanishing into the hole it had emerged from.

She rose to her feet, calm and deliberate. The snake wrapped around her arm seemed as much a part of her as an accessory—an extension of her own body. “Guide me,” she said, unable to see in the darkness. She extended her right arm forward, feeling for her way. “Which direction is the hole they came from? You should be able to see it.”

Daniel told her where to find the opening. Brenda carefully lifted the snake from her arm and placed it into the hole, pressing a kiss to its glistening scales before letting it go.

The sight sent an unexpected shudder of revulsion through Daniel. The moment she pressed her lips to the snake, a memory surged into his mind—Brenda, back in the lounge area, kissing him. His entire body tensed at the recollection, his stomach twisting in discomfort.

Brenda and Daniel stepped into the corridor one after the other. The approving expressions on Glisson and Cooper’s faces made it clear they recognized and respected the young intern’s bravery in protecting his companion.

But Sylvester was seething.

His body tensed like a coiled spring, barely restrained. Then, without warning, he lunged forward, nearly breaking into a run—until Holloway’s strong hands clamped down, holding him firmly in place.

Through clenched teeth, breath heavy with fury, Sylvester snapped, “Get back in your place! If I ever see you near my intern again—”

Before he could finish, Holloway’s voice rang out, sharp and commanding. “Get a hold of yourself!” With a firm tug, he yanked Sylvester back a few steps by the collar. “You do not shout at my

intern in my presence."

Sylvester barely managed to steady himself, shoving his disheveled hair back in frustration. Being reprimanded by his leader in front of the interns only fueled his rage.

Then, in a split second, he shot forward like a bullet.

Blazing past Holloway, he grabbed Daniel by the throat and slammed him hard against the wall.

A deep, searing pain spread across Daniel's back—almost identical to the agony caused by the stardust during its transformation. Sylvester's powerful grip crushed his throat, cutting off his air supply. His eyes widened in panic as oxygen deprivation set in, his limbs tensing as he struggled to breathe. The icy, razor-sharp gaze staring into him only deepened his helplessness.

"You idiot!" Holloway roared.

He grabbed Sylvester by the back and yanked him away with such immense force that the heir's feet lifted off the ground. Sylvester was flung across the corridor, crashing against the opposite wall before collapsing to the floor.

Holloway's glare could have burned straight through him. "Who do you think you are?! The Nivorum rules apply to you too!" he bellowed.

Sylvester struggled to push himself up from the ground, his lips trembling with rage. He stared at Holloway without blinking.

Holloway took a menacing step forward. "Get to my office. Now. And wait for me. Immediately!" His voice was razor-sharp, his eyes wide with fury. If anyone other than Sylvester had been on the receiving end of that glare, they might have suffered a heart attack from sheer terror.

Sylvester looked like he had a lot to say—but he knew better than to challenge Holloway physically.

"Now!" Holloway roared again.

The corridor fell into stunned silence. The terrifying ordeal in the small chamber with the snakes had already faded from everyone's minds.

Brenda looked at Daniel, who was leaning against the wall, with teary eyes. Olivia, too shocked to speak, held onto her friend's arm to support her.

The only one completely detached from the scene was Kevin. He remained curled in a corner, still softly crying, his body trembling with lingering fear.

Sylvester locked eyes with Daniel, his gaze piercing. He looked as though he was ready to lunge at him again—but he knew Holloway was on high alert now. His fists clenched so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

Holloway's sharp eyes flicked to Sylvester's hands. "Obey my command, Sylvester," he ordered.

The veins on Sylvester's forehead pulsed violently, his chest rising and falling with each deep breath as he struggled to suppress his rage. He never broke eye contact with Daniel, his nostrils flaring, teeth grinding.

Finally, with great reluctance, he turned on his heel. His footsteps were heavy enough to send ripples through the puddles of water in the corridor.

All that remained of him was the imprint of his fingers around Daniel's throat.

***

After the incident, training did not resume. All the interns were in the elevators, heading back to their floors. The girls took the right elevator with Cooper, while Daniel and Kevin rode the left one with their own leaders.

As the slow, noisy ride neared its end, Daniel felt something cold and metallic brush against his hand. He glanced down slightly and caught a faint glimmer from an object in Glisson's hand. Since Glisson was standing right behind him, he couldn't see his face—but he immediately sensed that he was being pulled into yet another situation that needed to be kept from Holloway.

Silently, he opened his palm. Glisson placed the cold metal into his hand. Daniel gripped it tightly and quickly scanned his surroundings to make sure no one had noticed.

Glisson gave his shoulder a firm, reassuring squeeze. "It was tense today. I'll be having a drink at Fast Cups at midnight."

From the front of the elevator, Holloway let out a mocking chuckle. "That place is so dull and pathetic, it doesn't even deserve to be in Nivorum Square."

"If it were up to you, no one born outside of Nivorum would deserve to be here," Glisson shot back.

Tension thickened in the elevator, but just as it was about to reach its peak, a soft chime signaled their arrival, and the doors slid open.

Daniel and Kevin stepped out and made their way down the corridor. Brenda and Olivia were approaching from the opposite direction. Without a word, they all headed straight for the lounge area and collapsed onto the couches.

As usual, Kevin immediately began sketching something, while Brenda picked up the book she had left behind and resumed reading.

"What do you all think Leader Holloway will do to him?" Olivia asked.

“Nothing,” Brenda replied without even looking up from her book.

Daniel shifted uncomfortably. “Can we not talk about this?” he muttered, the discomfort evident on his face. Then, turning to Kevin, he added, “Kevin, I need to ask you for a favor. There’s something I need to discuss with the girls privately. Would you mind giving us a moment?”

For a brief moment, Kevin’s expression flickered with hurt and frustration. He clearly wasn’t pleased with the request. With a sharp motion, he gathered his papers and pencils, then left the room without a word.

Both Brenda and Olivia looked at Daniel questioningly, silently demanding an explanation.

Daniel sat on the floor directly in front of them. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a vulture symbol and held it up.

The girls’ eyes flicked from the object in his palm to his face, then to each other.

“Leader Glisson gave me this in the elevator,” Daniel said.

Olivia, instantly intrigued, sat up straighter. “What for?” she asked.

“No idea.”

“Did Leader Holloway or Kevin see it?”

“No. He gave it to me in secret.”

Brenda remained silent, watching the exchange unfold.

Olivia was already swept up in the mystery. “There must be a reason. He wants you to use it somewhere,” she said, her gaze fixed on the symbol in Daniel’s hand.

“But where? This thing works everywhere,” Daniel muttered. Then, with a curious expression, he asked, “Do you think I should trust Leader Glisson?”

“Yes,” Brenda finally spoke. “Because Sylvester doesn’t like him. At least as much as he doesn’t like you.”

Daniel focused intently on her. “How do you know that?”

“Sylvester was talking in his sleep,” Brenda said smoothly. “He said Leader Glisson is unnecessary in Nivorum and that he should be eliminated.”

In reality, she had learned this by reading Sylvester’s mind. But since she still wanted to keep her ability a secret from Olivia, she chose to mask it with a lie.

Daniel had always wondered why Sylvester frequently went to Brenda’s house, but he had never dared to ask. Her previous sentence felt like the perfect opportunity.

“Why does he come to your place to sleep?” he blurted out.

A clear look of discomfort flashed across Brenda’s face. For a brief moment, she locked eyes with Olivia.

Olivia immediately picked up on her unease. A silent

understanding passed between them. In her mind, the real question that needed asking was something else entirely.

"Let's focus," Olivia said. "Did Glisson say anything to you?"

"No, he didn't speak at all. He only mentioned to Leader Holloway that he'd be drinking tonight."

Still sitting upright, hanging on to every word, Olivia furrowed her brows. "Are you sure he didn't give you any kind of sign? There must be a clue. He wouldn't just hand you a symbol that could get you into trouble for no reason."

"Maybe that was the clue," Brenda said calmly. "He might have told you exactly where to find him."

"He said he was going to Fast Cups," Daniel added.

Olivia's lips curled into an unconscious smile.

"Then we need to go there."

***

For nearly an hour, Daniel tried to convince the girls to stay on their floor. At first, he calmly explained that they shouldn't all put themselves in danger together. But when that didn't work, he resorted to a final threat—if they didn't let him go alone, he would hand the symbol over to Leader Holloway.

Reluctantly, Brenda and Olivia finally gave in.

Before heading out, Daniel stopped by his home to change. As he sorted through his clothes, he decided that formal attire would be more suitable—it would help him blend into the night. He fastened his own symbol around his right wrist and slipped Glisson's symbol into the left breast pocket of his jacket.

After running through his plan once more in his head, he stepped outside.

The moment he closed the door, he saw Brenda and Olivia waiting for him in the corridor. He walked toward them.

One last time, Olivia made an effort. "Let us come with you," she said. She wanted to help—but just as much, she didn't want to miss out on the adventure. Yet, the firm and resolute look in Daniel's eyes made her drop the request.

"This outfit suits you," Brenda said, adjusting the collar of his jacket. A shy smile flickered across her face, though she tried to suppress it. "Please, be careful."

Daniel simply nodded in response and turned toward the elevator.

Reaching into his breast pocket, he pulled out the symbol and scanned it against the panel. Instantly, nearly all the floor buttons lit up. He selected the one that would take him to the ground floor, and the elevator slowly began its descent.

***

Daniel had no idea what awaited him in the entrance hall. At first, he only glanced outside from the corner of his eye. Though it wasn't as crowded as during the daytime, the building was still lively. Some people passed through the main gate, entering and leaving the city of Nivorum, while others used the door leading to Nivorum Square.

As he stepped out of the elevator, he pulled up the collar of his jacket. Moving cautiously, he made sure not to draw attention to himself—an intern wandering the ground floor at this hour would definitely raise suspicion. Keeping close to a group of people, he tried to blend in.

His last unauthorized visit to Fast Cups had already landed him in trouble. This time, he couldn't even begin to guess the consequences of being seen outside his floor—especially while carrying a symbol that wasn't his.

Light snowfall dusted the air, and Nivorum Square felt even colder than during his previous visits. The biting wind sliced through his body, and the icy oxygen burned his lungs with every breath.

The people around him seemed to exist in an entirely different world. Those out for a night of fun headed toward the cafés and bars surrounding the square, while others who had taken a short break for conversation or a meal returned to the main building. What felt like a tense and dangerous night for Daniel was nothing more than an ordinary, pleasant evening for them.

Using his height to his advantage, he scanned his surroundings as he walked. He continued across the square until the familiar orange wooden exterior of Fast Cups came into view.

But all of its lights were out. The place was completely dark.

Regret settled deep in his chest—he had taken this risk for nothing. But after coming all this way, turning back wasn't an option. He kept moving forward.

Just as he approached his destination, he spotted a familiar pair of piercing blue eyes ahead.

Sylvester.

The heir strode toward him with firm, confident steps.

Daniel froze. A thousand possibilities raced through his mind.

Then, out of nowhere, an unfamiliar hand grabbed his arm.

Before he could react, he was yanked away—nearly dragged—and pulled behind the massive statue standing in the center of the square.

Stumbling, Daniel pressed against the cold granite, his heart pounding. His first thought was that Holloway had caught him. Fear surged through him as a thousand excuses formed in his mind, ready to spill from his lips.

But when he lifted his head, he realized the person standing before him wasn't Holloway.

It was Oscar, the old waiter.

"Where's the other symbol?" Oscar asked.

Daniel pointed to the one fastened to his collar, too stunned to speak.

"Good. This way," Oscar said before disappearing through the main building's entrance with surprising speed.

Daniel hurried after him, struggling to keep up. Knowing Sylvester was still in the square pushed him to move even faster.

Oscar gestured for him to follow again and then picked up his pace even more, heading straight for the main gate. The soldier stationed there, checking IDs, didn't seem to notice the old man slipping past him.

Daniel approached the gate right behind him, hesitating only for a second.

"Identification," the soldier said, his voice firm and authoritative. He extended a sleek tablet toward Daniel, his sharp eyes locked onto him.

Daniel pulled the symbol Glisson had given him from his collar. He tried to keep his movements steady, but tension had taken over his entire body—his knees trembled slightly. As he handed over the symbol, he nearly dropped it. His palms were slick with sweat, and the metal piece kept slipping through his fingers.

He scanned the symbol against the screen and glanced around, avoiding direct eye contact with the soldier. His gaze darted to anything but the man in front of him.

The few seconds of waiting felt like hours.

As soon as he heard the confirmation beep, he stuffed the symbol into his pocket and quickly slipped through the gate, stepping onto the vast streets of Nivorum.

Oscar was waiting just outside. "Let's go," he said.

They walked alongside the massive wall connected to the main building. Just a minute ago, Daniel had been in Nivorum Square—stepping onto this street now felt like entering an entirely different world. After the lively, dazzling atmosphere of the square, this place seemed dull, lifeless, and soulless. Compared to it, the city felt like a rural backwater no one would willingly visit.

The few people they passed along the way shot Daniel hateful glances. Unlike the bright and cheerful expressions of those in the square, these people looked as if they derived no joy from life at all.

After a few minutes of walking, Oscar lifted a half-open manhole cover and gestured for Daniel to go through.

Without questioning the old man's request, Daniel obeyed and

began descending the ladder. He had expected filthy puddles, a strong stench, and perhaps even a swarm of rats—but instead, he found himself in a clean, well-lit tunnel.

Without hesitation, he moved forward through the passage. At the end, he climbed up a metal ladder and emerged through an open hatch.

Looking around, he realized he was now behind the counter of Fast Cups. The doors were locked, chairs flipped upside down and stacked onto the tables. The place was eerily quiet.

Then, suddenly, Oscar appeared before him.

Startled, Daniel let out a small yelp. Somehow, the old man had gotten there before him.

“Leader Glisson is waiting for you downstairs,” Oscar said as he pushed open the door behind the bar.

Without hesitation, Daniel stepped inside.

This was the same door Glisson had used the day Olivia and he had come here for a drink.

Beyond it, an old wooden staircase led downward. The darkness didn’t bother Daniel as he carefully descended.

Soon, he found himself in the storage room of Fast Cups. Shelves lined with liquor crates and fruit baskets surrounded him.

“Welcome, Daniel,” a familiar voice greeted him.

Glisson led the way, heading toward the farthest corner of the storeroom. Daniel followed.

When they reached a section filled with neatly arranged wine bottles, Glisson reached out and pulled one from the shelf.

Immediately, the wall beside them shifted backward.

They stepped through the newly revealed door.

Daniel found himself in a room that looked like the set of a very old Western film. The wallpaper was faded, and the tables and chairs seemed to have defied time itself. Everything looked at least a hundred and fifty years old. There was even a typewriter sitting on the desk.

His mouth hung open as he took in every corner of the room. He had only ever seen objects like these in old movies and on the internet. Now, they were real, tangible, right in front of him. It felt as if he had traveled through time.

Glisson walked over to his desk and sat down in a worn leather armchair. It creaked heavily as he settled into it. He gestured toward the chair on the other side of the desk.

Snapping himself out of his fascination, Daniel sat down. Slowly, he reached into his pocket and placed the symbol Glisson had given him onto the table.

“Keep it,” Glisson said with a smile. “You might need it again.”

Daniel nodded and tucked the symbol back into his pocket. “What is all this for?”

Glisson leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. Before diving into a longer explanation, he simply said, “To help you pull yourself together.”

Locking eyes with Daniel, he added, “You still haven’t moved past what happened.”

Daniel’s expression darkened. He swallowed hard before managing to say, “I see him every night.”

“You have to let go of the past, Daniel. I’ve told you this before. What you did… it wasn’t your choice.”

Daniel nodded, offering no argument. He was too curious about what Glisson would say next to interrupt.

Glisson’s gaze dropped to the symbol on Daniel’s wrist. “He’s the one who made you get that.”

Daniel ran his fingers over the metal symbol. Ever since he had spoken to Hunt, he had been trying to understand how a simple piece of metal could have such a hold over him.

“Hunt said the same thing,” he murmured. “The Academy Principal.”

“What else did he tell you?” Lando Glisson asked carefully.

Daniel began recounting everything that had happened at the City Library—how the memory of killing someone had been erased from his mind, how an encounter he had never actually experienced had somehow become real in his thoughts. He shared every detail.

“He said we need to get rid of the symbols,” he added as he finished.

“The symbols are tied to your personality, Daniel. They reverse everything inside you.”

“But no one else went through anything like this. Why only me?” he asked.

“The answer lies within you,” Glisson said. “Something inside you is so intense that it triggered the symbol far too early.”

Daniel took a deep breath.

Ever since this all began, he had been so fixated on his fear of the dark that he had completely buried another emotion—one he had suppressed ever since overcoming it.

Slowly, he lifted his head and locked eyes with Leader Glisson.

“My father,” he said, his voice hoarse.

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“Your father?” Brenda asked, fixing her curious gaze on Daniel.

By the time Daniel had returned to the thirteenth floor in the early

hours of the morning, he had already hurried to his living quarters with Brenda and Olivia, who had been anxiously waiting for him. After quickly recounting his conversation with Leader Glisson, Brenda had asked that question.

"My father was a former soldier, and he wanted me to be one too. He spent years trying to train me, but he failed. Even in a war, the thought of killing someone… it made me feel like I was losing my mind."

A brief silence settled over the room as he finished speaking. No one said a word, but both girls were thinking the same thing.

Daniel hadn't felt discomfort over what he had done—until he learned that the person he had killed wasn't malicious.

He immediately understood the unspoken question hanging in the air.

"Because of the symbol," he said. "Probably, in a few months, I won't care about killing an innocent person either."

"We're changing," Brenda murmured with a sigh.

Daniel nodded grimly. "Into the exact opposite of who we were."

"That's ridiculous," Olivia scoffed. "So what, are you telling me Sylvester used to be a good person?"

Brenda's eyes flashed with anger. "Not a chance," she snapped. Then she turned to Daniel. "Did he say anything about the Academy?"

"Not really," Daniel replied. He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and pulled out a thick, smooth sheet of paper. Carefully, he handed it to Brenda. "He told me to give this to you."

Brenda unfolded the paper with care, her eyes scanning the embossed letters.

"I don't understand a thing," she muttered, still focused on the text. The entire document was written in an alphabet she didn't recognize.

Olivia leaned in for a closer look. "I think he believes you're the one who can figure it out."

"I'll look into it," Brenda said. She gently folded the paper and tucked it into her pocket. Then, absently, she twisted the ring that held her symbol. Taking a deep breath, she lifted her head and looked at her two friends.

"Maybe this has something to do with how we get rid of the symbols."

CHAPTER VII

WASTE

The past week had been their worst days in Nivorum.

Sylvester's attack on Daniel had resulted in his suspension from his duties as an heir for a month—news that should have been met with relief. But it wasn't nearly enough to erase the torment they had endured during training. Each of them had been pushed beyond their physical and mental limits, teetering on the edge of collapse.

Night after night, exhaustion consumed them all after dinner. Brenda would head to the library, determined to decipher the meaning of the paper Leader Glisson had given her. Daniel and Olivia tried to help, but more often than not, they found themselves dozing off among the bookshelves. The guilt of leaving her alone to return to their living quarters for sleep weighed heavily on them.

After Monday's training, where they had faced the snakes, the week only became more grueling.

They had been forced to endure even more terrifying exercises—being left without water in a scorching-hot room, waiting at the bottom of a pool until they were on the verge of suffocation, walking along the towering walls of Nivorum with the constant threat of falling.

Olivia, in particular, was nearing her breaking point, barely holding herself together by the end of each training day.

***

On Friday evening, a deep silence hung over the lounge.

Normally, by this hour, they were used to Olivia throwing things around the room in frustration. But that night, the silence was unsettling. No one made a sound, sitting as if they were on a landmine, unmoving.

Taking a deep breath, Olivia finally broke the silence.

"I'm leaving tonight," she said, her voice firm.

Everyone's attention snapped to her.

They all knew Olivia had been waiting for the right moment to get out of here. But they had assumed she was still waiting for a mission—no one had expected her to make such a sudden decision.

"Who wants to come with me?" she asked, her gaze sweeping over them.

“There’s no way out of here, Olivia. Accept it,” Brenda said.

“No, there is. Listen,” Olivia replied.

Then, she began explaining her escape plan in detail. At one point, she grabbed the papers in front of Kevin and started sketching it out for them.

Brenda, having glimpsed into the minds of the leaders and heirs, already knew this plan wouldn’t work.

“This is impossible,” she said firmly. “There’s no way to reach that gateway. And even if we did, we don’t have the knowledge to activate it.”

Kevin silently gathered his papers and pencils, leaving only the one Olivia had drawn on. He stood up and headed for the door.

“I’m not doing this,” he said.

Without looking back, he walked out of the room.

Olivia watched him leave with a sad smile. She had complete faith in her plan, yet she hadn’t even been able to convince the youngest among them.

Then, she turned to Daniel, her eyes searching his face.

She needed the symbol Leader Glisson had given him to carry out her plan.

Daniel lowered his head. His voice was reluctant, barely above a whisper.

“You don’t have to go. If you get caught… we don’t even know what they’ll do to you,” he said.

Olivia leaned back, sinking into the couch. She took a deep breath.

“I can’t watch TV because it only talks about how great Vulton Valtorin is, how much he has advanced Nivorum, and how happy the people are. The tablet they gave us? It’s only good for taking notes or reading messages. What they call training is nothing but torture. There’s no one my age here. I have no colleagues. No one in my family even knows where I am.”

Her voice cracked, growing more fragile with each word.

“I have responsibilities to fulfill. I miss my old life. I miss my mom, my dad, my brother.”

Her words faded into little more than a whisper.

Brenda slowly set the book in her lap aside. She met Olivia’s trembling gaze with understanding, then rose to her feet and sat beside her. Gently, she took her hand.

“You’re a strong woman, Olivia. I know exactly what it means to miss your family. If this is what you want, I’ll help you.”

Olivia’s eyes welled up with tears. Her voice shook as she whispered, “Thank you.”

A single tear rolled down her cheek and fell from her chin.

Daniel let out a deep sigh and stood up.

“Well then, let’s get ready. We have a mission to complete.”

***

By the early hours of the morning, they were ready to execute Olivia’s plan.

Using the badge Glisson had given Daniel, they descended to the ninth floor. According to the information Olivia had gathered from Heir Cooper and the staff, this floor housed the building’s essential service areas—kitchen, storage rooms, laundry, electrical controls, water tanks, and waste transfer areas.

Daniel cautiously peeked out of the elevator. His eyes swept across the corridor. After making sure no one was around, he turned back and whispered, “It’s clear. You can step out.”

Olivia and Brenda silently followed him into the hallway.

This floor was nothing like the ones they were used to. The luxurious carpets of the thirteenth floor had been replaced by bare metal flooring. Every step they took sent heavy echoes reverberating down the narrow corridor. The dim lights flickered, casting an unsteady glow, while the mechanical hum of running machines and the scent of oil in the air made the place feel like an industrial worksite.

As they moved cautiously through the dim corridor, Olivia suddenly tensed.

“Be careful—someone’s coming,” she whispered.

Daniel spotted the figure in the darkness. A man was pushing a large trash container toward them.

He quickly pulled back, pressing his back against the wall, instinctively spreading his arms to shield the girls behind him.

“He’s right ahead,” he murmured.

“There,” Olivia whispered, pointing to a door slightly ajar, its light spilling faintly into the corridor. “That room is empty.”

Without hesitation, all three of them slipped inside.

Once again, Olivia’s instincts had been right. The room was completely vacant. It resembled a small office, with a single desk in the center. An old, boxy computer monitor sat on top, alongside a thick file.

“We’ll wait here until he passes,” Daniel said.

“He won’t come in. I can feel it,” Olivia reassured them confidently.

The silence was broken by Brenda’s trembling voice.

“They were exiled,” she muttered.

She was bent over the desk, practically burying her nose in the file as she scanned its contents.

Daniel and Olivia turned toward her at once.

"Exiled? What do you mean?" Olivia asked.

Brenda didn't lift her eyes from the file. "Be quiet. I'm trying to memorize this," she whispered.

Just then, footsteps in the corridor grew louder.

Everyone held their breath.

The man walked past the door at a steady pace. A few moments later, his footsteps faded into the distance, and the hallway fell silent again.

Olivia slowly pushed the door open a crack.

"He was carrying a trash container. We're on the right track. Let's move quickly," she whispered.

The three of them slipped back into the corridor, moving like shadows in the dim light.

At the end of the hall, the large gray door to the kitchen came into view.

According to the information Olivia had gathered, the kitchen was close to the waste transfer area.

"We're almost there," Olivia whispered as they passed the kitchen door.

Suddenly, a loud crash echoed down the corridor.

Brenda had accidentally knocked over a cluster of glass bottles. A few of them shattered on the metal floor, the sharp sound ringing through the hallway.

All three of them froze in place.

As the echoes of breaking glass faded, the first thing they heard was the rapid pounding of their own hearts.

The second was the sound of the kitchen door opening.

They pressed themselves against the wall, trying to disappear into the darkness. Covering their mouths and noses with their hands, they held their breath.

"Who's there?" a man called out.

Then, louder this time, "Who is it?"

He began moving forward, his steps heading directly toward where the interns were hiding.

Daniel noticed the man's pace slowing.

Each beat of his heart stretched longer, the moments between them growing unnaturally sluggish. The way the girls glanced at each other also seemed to slow. His mind raced, but his body refused to move.

Then, without thinking, he slipped a hand into his jacket pocket.

His fingers brushed against something small and round. He grasped a handful and pulled it out.

Peering down, he realized—nuts.

Peanuts and walnuts from Fast Cups, stuffed into his pocket earlier.

Before he could even process it, his hand moved on its own, hurling them toward the man.

His eyes widened as he watched the scene unfold.

Once again, he felt as if the badge had decided for him.

He could see the arc of each nut in midair, tracking their movement with eerie clarity. The peanuts and walnuts zipped past the man on either side, vanishing into the darkness beyond.

And then, time snapped back to normal.

The man flinched at the sudden noise behind him, instinctively turning toward it.

"This is not the time for jokes!" he barked into the empty hallway.

After scanning his surroundings for a few more seconds, he grumbled under his breath and walked back into the kitchen.

Daniel exhaled sharply.

Sweat dripped from his forehead, trickling down his face. He shut his eyes for a brief moment, trying to steady his nerves.

"I'm sorry," Brenda whispered, guilt weighing on her voice.

Olivia hooked an arm around Brenda's. "Be more careful. We almost got caught," she murmured.

Daniel straightened, preparing to move forward. "Let's go. We need to hurry."

But before he could take a step, Brenda suddenly grabbed his arm.

"Look across."

Directly in front of them, a door stood cloaked in shadows.

A sign above it read: *Waste Transfer Area.*

They immediately darted across the corridor.

Daniel slowly pushed open the door—then recoiled as an overwhelming, sour stench hit him full force.

He instinctively took a step back.

"We can still turn back," he muttered, grimacing.

Brenda clamped a hand over her mouth and nose. "It stinks," she choked out, struggling not to gag.

"At least you don't see it. It looks just as disgusting as it smells," Daniel muttered, staring into the dark room with revulsion.

"I never said it would be easy," Olivia shot back. "Come on, hurry up. They'll be here soon."

Daniel pulled his sweater up over his nose, trying to shield himself from the stench. He took the lead, guiding them through the dark room.

"Where are the empty containers?" he asked.

Olivia's plan was simple but dangerous: they would hide inside an empty trash container and hope to be transported outside the main building.

“The ones in the back,” Olivia replied.

“There’s one over here. Follow me,” Daniel whispered, moving cautiously.

Olivia and Brenda clung to the back of his jacket, using him as a guide through the darkness. They had barely reached the center of the room when the door creaked open behind them.

Daniel spun around instinctively.

The man they had seen earlier in the corridor had returned for another trash container.

But this time, he wasn’t alone.

Someone else was with him.

“This way,” Daniel whispered urgently. He grabbed both girls by the arms and pulled them toward the wall.

Lifting the lid of the large trash container in front of them, he flinched as an even stronger wave of rotten stench burst out, flooding the air around them.

“Inside. Now,” he whispered, barely audible.

Without hesitation, Olivia reached for the edge of the container and hoisted herself up. She threw herself onto the pile of trash, her face contorted in disgust. But she had done this before.

Back when she was chasing news, hiding in garbage was nothing new to her.

Brenda, however, gagged the moment the container’s foul odor hit her.

Daniel reacted instantly, clamping a hand over her mouth. He glanced toward the door, checking if the men had heard.

“Please, stay calm,” he whispered.

He grabbed Brenda by the waist and placed her inside the container as if she were a large rubbish bag. Immediately after, he pulled himself up and jumped in, shutting the lid behind them.

Darkness fell, bringing with it a suffocating silence.

The stench of rot made it nearly impossible to breathe. Leaking fluids from the waste seeped onto their skin, intensifying the urge to vomit.

Nearby, another container shifted—then another.

For a brief moment, Daniel considered lifting his head to peek outside, but he wasn’t sure if someone else had arrived. Maybe they could lie about not being on their assigned floor, but there was no logical excuse for hiding inside a rubbish container.

A few minutes later, their container trembled slightly. The grating sound of metal wheels scraping against the floor echoed as it rocked forward. When it finally came to a halt with a faint jolt, muffled voices drifted from outside, but their words were impossible to make out.

In the darkness, Daniel noticed Brenda trembling. He slowly reached for her hand, hoping to calm her.

For a brief moment, the voices outside fell silent. Then, the iron wheels beneath them vibrated once more, and the container began moving again. A few seconds later, the clanking sound of elevator gates being pulled open reached their ears.

Olivia was pleased that her plan seemed to be working. If everything went as expected, they would be taken down to the lower floor, loaded onto a waste truck, and transported out of the city.

But as the elevator began moving, Daniel felt something was wrong.

“The elevator isn’t going down…” he tried to whisper, but Olivia quickly clamped a hand over his mouth. She couldn’t risk the men outside hearing them.

When the elevator finally stopped, the sound of a metal door creaking open filled the air. The container rolled forward a few meters before coming to an abrupt halt. Inside, they held their breath, waiting for what would come next.

It was Olivia who broke the silence. She had just realized something—and the others needed to know.

“Leader Glisson is here,” she whispered.

The words had barely left her lips when the lid of the container was suddenly flung open. A sharp, blinding light flooded in, forcing Olivia and Brenda to turn their faces away.

Daniel, blinking against the glare, could clearly see Glisson standing above him, smiling.

“Yes, he’s here,” Daniel murmured, his voice barely audible. He had no idea what to do, frozen in place amidst the rubbish.

“Have you decided to become the first homeless residents of the main building?” Glisson mocked, his gaze sweeping over the interns still huddled inside the container.

The teasing remark, rather than a sharp reprimand or threat, eased some of Daniel’s tension. Yet, he remained acutely aware of the gravity of the situation.

“Get out of there and go take a shower,” Glisson said, still smiling. Then his eyes locked onto Daniel’s, and his tone grew more serious.

“Tomorrow afternoon. You know where to be. All three of you.”

***

The three interns descended toward the ground floor, the elevator still reeking of garbage. Since it was the weekend, they were dressed in their Nivorum formal attire. As they neared their destination, tension and curiosity grew stronger within them.

Just as the elevator was about to reach the ground floor, Olivia suddenly lifted her head.

"Sylvester is here," she murmured.

When the elevator doors slid open, Sylvester stood right in front of them. His icy gaze pierced through them like a blade.

"Are you heading off to celebrate my punishment?" he asked, his voice dripping with venomous sarcasm. He personally pulled open the elevator's protective grating.

His eyes locked onto Brenda, a twisted flicker of desire passing through his gaze. Slowly, he dragged his eyes over her, taking in every detail. With a repulsive smirk, he reached toward her face.

"Aren't you dressed a little too sexy to go to Fast Cups?" he sneered, his gaze trailing over her from head to toe. "You look stunning in that outfit," he added.

Daniel was seething. It felt as though lava was coursing through his veins instead of blood, his entire body burning with barely contained fury. He clenched his fists, struggling to stay calm.

"You talk about me a lot in your lounge area, don't you?" Sylvester continued. "Were you really that curious about what Holloway would do to me, Daniel?"

Then, he reached for Brenda's face, brushing his fingers against her chin and tracing her cheek with his thumb.

"It's nice to know at least one of you understands that you can't do anything."

Brenda flinched, instinctively trying to pull away, but she knew resisting Sylvester would be pointless. Her hands trembled helplessly at her sides.

Olivia glanced at Brenda's shaking hands. It pained her to see someone who had tried to help her the previous night now looking so vulnerable. She couldn't stay silent any longer.

Stepping forward, she forcefully shoved Sylvester's arm down.

"Don't ever touch Brenda again," she said, her voice firm and unwavering.

Sylvester responded with a mocking smile, his pale eyes locking onto hers.

"I don't know why you changed your mind about escaping last night," he said in a taunting tone, "but I was waiting for you at the gateway."

The three interns froze, holding their breath. The fact that Sylvester knew so much unsettled them all.

Before anyone could respond, his piercing gaze shifted to Daniel.

"You do know I'm going to kill you, don't you?" he asked.

Daniel wavered between fear and fury, unsure what to feel.

Then, behind Sylvester, a white-haired man approached with slow,

deliberate steps. His voice was calm yet commanding as he spoke.

"The administration has warned you, Heir Valtorin. Restricted heirs should know to keep their distance from interns."

A dozen coat-clad soldiers stood beside him, their rigid postures making it clear they were there to protect him.

All eyes immediately turned to the old man. His face was far from unfamiliar—it took them only a second to recognize him. They remembered his powerful speech from the balcony of the entrance hall on their first day in Nivorum.

The man standing before them was none other than the Supreme Leader.

Vulton Valtorin.

Sylvester swallowed hard and turned around. It was obvious he feared Vulton Valtorin. He bowed his head respectfully and waited.

"The duty of an heir is to contribute to the interns' development, not to cause trouble. I trust you won't forget that," Vulton Valtorin said, his voice carrying a cold, authoritative calm.

Sylvester bowed his head once more before the elder man. Without lifting his eyes from the ground, he muttered in a low voice,

"I'm sorry, Dad."

***

The three of them made their way through Nivorum Square toward Fast Cups. With Vulton Valtorin's arrival, they had escaped Sylvester's threats and rushed outside. However, the tension from what had happened still lingered over them.

Daniel turned to Brenda. "Did you know he's the city ruler's son?" he asked.

"No," Brenda replied, unable to hide her disappointment. "It never even crossed his mind."

She paused for a moment, then, remembering Olivia's presence, quickly corrected herself.

"I mean, he never mentioned it."

Olivia's mind was too preoccupied to catch Brenda's slip.

"No one calls him Valtorin. Everyone just uses his first name. We never would have figured it out."

"We're never going to get rid of him," Brenda muttered, clear disappointment on her face. She was so upset that she didn't even turn to look at Nivorum Square, despite seeing it for the first time.

They nearly rushed into Fast Cups. Inside, only a few tables were occupied. Behind the bar, Oscar was busy wiping down glasses. When he saw his expected guests walk in, he sent them a warm smile before gesturing toward the door behind him and pushing it open.

Olivia and Brenda exchanged puzzled looks. They had no idea what was going on, but Daniel understood the message immediately.

"Follow me," he said confidently. "We're going to Leader Glisson's office."

***

When the interns stepped through the hidden door, Leader Lando Glisson was seated at his desk. He lifted his head slightly and smiled.

"Welcome," he said, gesturing toward the chairs.

Daniel and Olivia took their seats on the wooden chairs, waiting to hear what Glisson had to say about yesterday's events. Meanwhile, Brenda admired the room, turning in place as she scanned her surroundings. The sight of centuries-old books lining the shelves captivated her. She was completely mesmerized until Leader Glisson's gentle voice brought her back to reality.

"If something catches your interest, you're welcome to take a look."

Brenda's face lit up with delight.

"Some of these are original manuscripts," she said excitedly, her eyes still roaming over the books. She finally sat down on the remaining chair, though she was too absorbed to notice the antique furniture around her.

Olivia, on the other hand, was fixated on the old typewriter sitting on the desk.

"I've seen one like this in the museum of the newspaper I worked for," she said.

"Phoenix Chronicle, right?" Glisson asked.

Hearing the name of her newspaper, a proud glimmer appeared in Olivia's eyes. But that pride was quickly replaced by a wistful sigh.

"You miss your old life the most, don't you?" Glisson continued. Then, in a warm but inquisitive tone, he added, "Was the escape plan yesterday your idea?"

Olivia didn't answer, but she gave a small nod.

"I wish there were a way," Glisson said with a deep sigh. He was slowly beginning to reveal what was on his mind. As soon as he had everyone's full attention, he continued, "Everything in this room was brought from my home. This desk, the chairs, the books, the typewriter… All of them carry traces of my past life."

His fingers glided over the typewriter as his gaze drifted into the past, as if his mind had embarked on a journey through time.

"I know all too well the weight of leaving everything and everyone behind. But they won't just let you leave. Here, in a way, you're

prisoners."

Everyone in the room tried to connect with the emotions in Glisson's words. But the realization that there was no way out hit them like a slap to the face.

No one spoke. They only exchanged glances, trying to process what Leader Glisson had just said—searching for a way out.

"Actually, I wanted to show you all this after a long conversation, but now seems like a better time," Glisson said as he rose from his creaking armchair. "We can save the talking for tomorrow. Follow me."

Without hesitation, they followed him up the dimly lit office room's stairs to the upper floor of Fast Cups.

"Oscar, can you check the door? We need to use the tunnel," Leader Glisson said.

Almost instantly, Oscar seemed to vanish from where he stood, reappearing by the door in the blink of an eye. He had moved so fast that it looked as if he had teleported.

Brenda stared at him in astonishment. But before she could linger on it, the voices of her friends, who had already descended into the tunnel, urged her to follow. Just as she finished climbing down, she saw Oscar shutting the hatch.

"Can he teleport?" she asked in amazement.

"No, he just…" Daniel started, pausing for a moment. The admiration in his voice made it clear that he, too, was impressed by Oscar's ability. "…moves really fast."

By the time they reached the end of the tunnel, only Daniel knew where they were heading. Under Glisson's lead, they emerged into Nivorum's cold, dark streets.

"Welcome to reality," Glisson said, his voice laced with discontent. He swiftly crossed the road and disappeared into a narrow gap between two buildings.

Daniel, Olivia, and Brenda followed immediately after him.

The sight before them was the complete opposite of Nivorum's grandeur. Old, nearly crumbling houses lined both sides of the long alley. Though the road widened slightly beyond the entrance, it was still barely wide enough for a single car to pass through.

"The people outside the main building live here," Glisson said, pausing. "Their only goal is to complete the tasks assigned by the administration and earn a bit of stardust."

Olivia couldn't contain her curiosity.

"And if they don't?"

"If they don't, they become ordinary," Brenda said in a quiet voice. "I read it in a book in the library."

"In Nivorum, those who become ordinary are exiled to the outside

world," Glisson continued. "Compared to life beyond Nivorum's walls, these homes might as well be paradise."

As they examined the houses more closely, they couldn't help but wonder what kind of outside world could make this place seem like paradise. The street was the most desolate they had ever seen. The stench of rotting wood filled the air. The house to their right had several broken windows, its tattered curtains swaying helplessly in the wind. The house next to it didn't even have a front door.

Daniel glanced into the dark interior of the doorless house. An old, torn blue couch sat neglected inside. It was hard to believe anyone lived there, yet behind the couch, he spotted an elderly woman standing with her back turned, busy with something in the kitchen.

Directly in front of them stood another house, its entire front wall collapsed. With no exterior wall, the inside was fully exposed, resembling an open balcony.

"It's like time travel," Olivia murmured in awe.

Lando Glisson gave a sorrowful smile and nodded. "If these houses had been taken care of, they would actually seem modern compared to where I came from."

A few people moved along the street, all walking quickly as if they were ghosts hurrying toward some unknown destination. Today, they finally understood why the people of Nivorum seemed so devoid of life. Almost all of them looked weak and frail, their bodies barely nourished—just surviving.

"What about the main street?" Daniel asked. "The houses there look more intact. I even saw a few restaurants and cafés."

"Military personnel," Glisson said in an even tone. "They live under slightly better conditions. They're here to keep these people in line." Then, turning directly to Olivia, he added, "Some of those soldiers also guard the Gateways—to prevent unauthorized crossings."

Olivia immediately understood the message Glisson was giving her. Her eyes drifted for a moment, her mind filling with thoughts.

Brenda let out a deep sigh. "Everyone is so unhappy," she said, her expression just as troubled as the people around them. "It's nothing like what they show on television."

"Because that's how they want you to see it," Leader Glisson replied. "They plant the idea that enduring the training is necessary for a place in this so-called great city." Then, lowering his voice slightly, he continued, "People are unhappy because first, they lost their real lives. Then, they lost the main building."

"Was everyone here once in the main building?" Olivia asked, unable to suppress her curiosity.

"Of course. Everyone spends at least one term as an intern. If they're deemed unfit for the main building, they're sent here…"

Brenda, who knew she wasn't just considered unfit for the main building but for all of Nivorum because of the abilities she kept hidden, finished Glisson's sentence:

"And if they're seen as excess for all of Nivorum, they're sent to the outside world."

***

Since there was so much to discuss, they headed straight to the lounge area when they returned to the thirteenth floor.

Olivia stretched out on the large couch and let out a deep sigh.

"I'm trapped here," she said. For the first time, her usually confident voice carried a hint of hopelessness.

"You'll find another way," Brenda said as she placed the books she had received from Leader Glisson on the coffee table. It was the first time she had responded positively to a conversation about leaving Nivorum.

Olivia pulled her legs up, making space for Brenda on the couch.

"Leader Glisson said there's no way."

"There's always a way." Brenda adjusted her skirt as she sat down, clearly uncomfortable in the Nivorum attire she was forced to wear. "Look at me. I spend every minute waiting for Sylvester to show up."

Olivia imagined herself in Brenda's place, living under the constant shadow of someone like Sylvester. The thought alone was suffocating —her chest tightened.

"Why is he so…" she started to ask, but her sentence trailed off.

Then, the pieces of the puzzle clicked into place.

Sylvester's relentless pressure on Brenda. His visits to her home. His intense hatred toward Daniel… Suddenly, it all made sense.

Brenda had been abused.

Olivia hesitated, trying to find the right words.

"Yes," Brenda said unhappily, looking straight into Olivia's eyes.

"How did you know I…"

"I just do," Brenda cut in before she could finish.

Daniel realized that Brenda had read Olivia's mind and responded accordingly. But he couldn't figure out what the conversation was about. His eyes darted between the two of them.

Slowly, Olivia sat up on the couch. She leaned toward Brenda and wrapped her arms around her tightly.

"We'll find a way out for both of us. Don't worry," she whispered, a single tear rolling down her cheek.

Brenda nodded in response, her own eyes beginning to glisten.

"We need some girl talk here, Daniel. Go find out where Kevin is," Olivia said, motioning for him to leave.

“Are you two okay?”

Olivia’s voice turned more serious. “We’re fine. Just go already.”

“Alright, fine. I’m going,” Daniel said as he got up from his chair and left the lounge area.

His mind was already a mess, and the girls’ behavior only made it more confusing. He headed toward Kevin’s living quarters and knocked on door number 131.

A moment later, Kevin opened the door, his expression clearly surprised at the unexpected visitor.

“The girls are having a private conversation. I figured I’d come here for a chat,” Daniel said.

“With me? Sure, come in,” Kevin replied, opening the door wider.

Daniel stepped inside. The furnishings were identical to those in his own apartment—a couch, a desk, a television… But the walls were different. Dozens of drawings, all made by Kevin since his arrival, were taped up, covering the space.

Kevin quickly grabbed the glowing tablet from the coffee table, switched it off, and placed it in a far corner.

“How did you get that thing to work? I couldn’t figure it out,” Daniel asked with a small grin.

Kevin, suddenly animated, replied, “Oh, you just… have to scan your symbol on the back panel.”

Daniel turned his attention to the drawings on the walls. Some looked very familiar—the snake that had fallen from the crevice, Nivorum Square, the bus they had taken when they first arrived, the garbage container inside the elevator…

But others were more complex and harder to decipher—a man floating in midair, two interwoven hourglasses, a gravestone topped with a crown.

“Nice drawings,” Daniel said, noticing the boy’s work for the first time.

Kevin smiled proudly. “Thanks.”

“Do they all mean something?”

Kevin shook his head. “No. They’re just whatever comes to mind when I pick up a pencil.”

Daniel nodded and sank into the couch. “You went outside for the first time today. What did you think?” He wasn’t really sure what to talk about—just trying to buy time for the girls.

Kevin shrugged. “Boring. Not much to do alone.”

Daniel smirked slightly. “We went to a bar,” he admitted a little sheepishly. “You know, not exactly a place for your age.”

For a brief moment, excitement flickered in Kevin’s eyes. “Well, can we all do something together tomorrow?”

“Sorry, Kevin. We have things to take care of,” he said.

“All three of you?”

He nodded silently. “I should get going,” he added, standing up. Without lingering, he made his way to the door and stepped into the corridor, a faint guilt gnawing at him for leaving Kevin alone.

When he peeked back into the lounge, Olivia was holding Brenda’s hand, speaking softly. Both of their eyes were red and puffy, tear-streaked faces making it clear they’d been crying for a while.

Sensing the delicate moment, he said nothing. Quietly, he stepped back, retreating into the corridor without disturbing them.

CHAPTER VIII
INTRAVENOUS

The next morning, after breakfast, the interns walked together through the cold air of Nivorum Square. This time, at least, they hadn't left Kevin alone until they reached the square. Through the light mist, the orange wooden exterior of Fast Cups finally began to emerge.

"Kevin, we have some things to take care of," Olivia said gently, offering the boy a warm smile. "You know you're too young to go in there."

"Can't we go somewhere else?" Kevin asked, his expression slightly downcast.

"Just a few hours, then we'll meet back here," Olivia said, trying to reassure him.

Just as she finished speaking, she felt Leader Glisson's presence.

"Then it looks like you'll be having a girls' day," Glisson said, placing a hand on Daniel's shoulder. "I need to take my intern for the day."

"But we had plans," Brenda said hesitantly, her voice barely above a whisper.

Leader Holloway gave one of his rare smiles.

"All of Nivorum has a plan," he said.

He gave Daniel a small push on the shoulder, urging him to walk. Without another word, they turned back toward the main building, leaving the others behind.

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Daniel's heart was pounding in his throat. As the elevator ascended, dozens of different scenarios raced through his mind.

Leader Holloway might have found out about the symbol Leader Glisson had given him, or maybe he had discovered that he had secretly gone to Fast Cups.. Perhaps he knew about the escape plan involving the garbage container. Or maybe he was about to be reprimanded for Sylvester's attack on him.

"I'm talking to you!"

Holloway's shout jolted Daniel out of his thoughts.

The elevator doors had already opened, and Leader Holloway had stepped out.

“Get over here!” the leader snapped again.

Daniel hurried out of the elevator and followed him, glancing around to take in his surroundings. Aside from the thirteenth and ninth floors, he had never seen any other part of the main building.

Unlike those floors, which had no windows at all, this one had massive glass panels, much like the entrance hall. When he glanced down, he realized they were hundreds of meters above Nivorum Square. The colorful buildings looked like matchboxes from up here, and the endless landscape beyond them stretched as far as the eye could see.

“This is a special floor,” Holloway said as he walked down the corridor. “Only a few interns have ever had the privilege of being here.”

Daniel followed, his confusion growing. “Is that a good thing?” he asked, his voice carrying both curiosity and unease.

“Of course. We’re here to accelerate your development.”

Holloway opened a door with frosted glass and stepped inside.

Daniel followed him in without a word.

The room looked like a hospital ward, filled with unfamiliar devices whose functions he couldn’t even begin to guess. Against the wall stood a bed covered in white sheets, and next to it, several IV bottles were arranged neatly.

However, unlike the ones he had seen in the Lingerwood hospital, these IVs contained a mixture of liquid and light, shimmering and pulsating in a mesmerizing glow.

“Sit,” Holloway ordered, gesturing toward the bed.

Daniel slowly perched on the edge, his tension obvious. He avoided making eye contact with Leader Holloway and kept cracking his fingers anxiously.

Holloway pulled up the only armchair in the room and sat down directly across from him. Leaning back, he let a heavy silence settle before finally speaking.

“Every meal you eat in Nivorum is special. Every single one contains stardust.”

Daniel listened intently. This had been mentioned briefly when he was first introduced to the strange food here, but he had never received a detailed explanation. Now, he hung onto every word.

“Stardust doesn’t only affect humans—it can strike animals and plants as well. As long as something is alive, it can absorb it. More stardust means more power.”

He gestured toward the IV bottles in the corner of the room.

“These IVs contain stardust as well—far more than what you get through food.”

“Then why haven’t we been using these from the start?”

Holloway stood up and picked up one of the IV bottles, carefully attaching the tubes to prepare it.

"Because bottling it is incredibly difficult. That's why we only use it for interns we consider special," he said, his eyes still focused on the IV.

"You think I'm special, Leader Holloway?" Daniel asked.

"Lie down," Holloway instructed as he approached and prepared to open a vein in Daniel's arm. "I suppose you are," he added.

Hesitantly, Daniel stretched out his arm and lay back on the bed. When the cold needle pierced his skin, a faint hiss of discomfort escaped his lips.

"I noticed something in your last training session inside the dark box," Holloway said, adjusting the medication at the bedside. "There's a change in you that I didn't expect—something related to death." His eyes flickered toward Daniel for a brief moment. "What is it about death that frightens you?"

"I don't know," Daniel replied, evading the question. More than anything, he wished he could ask Leader Glisson what the right answer should be.

"Is there nothing in your past—no fear connected to death?" Holloway pressed, mixing the contents of a syringe into the serum.

The liquid dispersed within the glowing substance, breaking into thousands of tiny, dancing droplets.

"Nothing besides my mother's death," he said, continuing to conceal what had happened during the mission. He fought to suppress the rising guilt within him.

Leader Holloway nodded. "This medication will put you to sleep. When you wake up, you might feel the same aches as you did on your first day. I'll come get you in the evening and take you back to your floor."

Daniel felt his eyelids growing heavier. He tried to keep his eyes open, but it wasn't long before Holloway's silhouette blurred and slowly faded from view.

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Daniel forced his eyes open.

The sharp pain in his head and the burning sensation in his chest felt all too familiar. It was just like what he had experienced after drinking rum at Fast Cups last week—but this time, it was far more intense. He was nearly at the same threshold of pain he had felt on his first day.

Letting out a deep groan, he scanned the room. It was empty.

"Leader Holloway!" he called out.

The only response was the echo of his own voice bouncing off the cold walls. His gaze shifted to the IV bottle hanging from the ceiling. The liquid inside was completely gone. He had no idea how many hours he had been unconscious.

He called out once more but received no reply. Deciding to move on his own, he slowly removed the needle from his arm. A few drops of blood trickled from the vein, but he ignored them as he stood up from the bed and made his way toward the door.

Through the corridor's large glass windows, he looked down at Nivorum Square. The shop lights shimmered, and people wandered beneath the light snowfall. He wondered what Brenda and Olivia were discussing with Leader Glisson.

But then, a reflection in the glass erased all other thoughts from his mind.

A green glow rippled across the surface of the window.

And then, that venomous voice echoed through the corridor.

"Finally, we're alone."

The moment Daniel heard that voice, he knew exactly who was behind him.

Every drop of blood in his body seemed to freeze in place. The strength in his legs faded, making it difficult to stand. He swallowed hard and turned around.

Sylvester was approaching with slow, deliberate steps. The glowing whip in his hand trailed along the floor, stretching all the way down. The mocking, menacing smirk on his lips was terrifying enough to keep Daniel frozen in place.

Daniel took a step back, pressing himself against the glass. That was when he noticed Sylvester's entire body pulsing with a green luminescence.

"Sylvester," was all he managed to say, his voice weak and trembling.

Sylvester's smirk widened. He was enjoying the sight of the intern on the verge of surrender. He swung the whip at his sides, sending waves of light rippling through the corridor before they faded into nothingness.

"It's time to die, Daniel," he said, quickening his steps as he raised one of his whips and lashed it toward him.

Daniel's eyes widened in terror at the sudden attack. He had no idea what to do against the stardust-charged strike hurtling toward him at full speed.

At that moment, just like before, everything around him seemed to slow down.

Sylvester's whip moved in slow motion, like strands of hair swaying in a gentle breeze. The light in the air crept toward him in

intricate detail, as though time had nearly come to a standstill.

Once again, Daniel's body moved independently of his mind. His left hand reflexively slid over his symbol. As if an invisible force had pulled him aside, his body swiftly shifted out of the way.

The moment his fingertips touched his symbol, a familiar glow ignited.

The crossbow he had wielded before materialized in his hands once again.

Sylvester advanced with an unreadable expression. The crack of his whip rang out as it struck the glass behind Daniel, sending a ripple of light across the surface.

It felt as if Daniel were reliving a scene from a film he had already watched. His body, moving beyond his control, raised the crossbow, aimed at Sylvester, and fired. This time, he was certain the luminous arrow would hit its mark.

The arrow soared through the air, passing straight through Sylvester's head.

Yet, he didn't react.

He continued walking toward Daniel with the same chilling composure, as if he hadn't felt it at all.

Behind him, the arrow embedded itself into the wall, flashed briefly, and then vanished completely.

Daniel stood frozen, barely able to breathe. His shot had done nothing, and this time, Sylvester was too close to miss his next attack.

"Well, well… it seems there are abilities we didn't know about," came a commanding, inquisitive voice from the other end of the corridor.

Leader Holloway lowered his cane, which pulsed with a vivid green glow. As the light from the cane dimmed, Sylvester's figure began to fade.

Daniel had no idea what was happening. A whirlwind of fear and confusion swirled in his mind, yet he couldn't tear his eyes away from Holloway.

When the green light in the vulture's eyes atop Holloway's cane finally flickered out, Sylvester vanished completely.

"Did he… die?" Daniel asked, his voice trembling with disbelief.

"Sylvester was never really here," Holloway said as he approached with calm, confident steps. There was a hint of satisfaction in his voice, the sound of a small victory.

"He was merely an illusion. But that's not the real issue…" His gaze shifted to Daniel's hand, still gripping the crossbow.

"On that mission we went on… you were the one who killed that man, weren't you?"

Daniel was only now piecing it all together.

The very thing Leader Glisson had asked him to hide—he had just unknowingly repeated right in front of Leader Holloway.

He had no idea what to say, so he chose to remain silent.

"If your symbol reacted this quickly, even to an illusion, it's no surprise you were able to do it in a real fight," Holloway said, studying him carefully.

"I don't know how I did it," Daniel admitted.

Leader Holloway nodded calmly.

"We'll have plenty of time to discuss that," he said. His voice carried its usual authority, but beneath it, there was an unmistakable note of curiosity.

"But what I'm really wondering is something else. Why did you hide it? You had the perfect chance to prove yourself."

Daniel hesitated for a moment.

"I was just scared," he answered quickly. He didn't want to drag Leader Glisson into this—not before he could explain everything.

"New fears, new abilities," Holloway mused.

After a brief silence, he added, "We'll talk more about this later. For now, go rest. Get some sleep and clear your mind."

***

Daniel stepped out of the elevator and into the corridor of the thirteenth floor.

There was no one around. He wasn't sure how late it was. He checked the lounge area and the library—both were empty. He even glanced into the gym, which they had never used since arriving, before heading to the dining room.

After concluding that everyone had already retreated to their living quarters, he returned to his own apartment.

He shrugged off his jacket and sweater, tossing them onto the couch. Just as he was about to lie down, a soft knock at the door made him jump.

Sylvester was usually the one knocking at his door. The thought sent a cold cramp twisting through his stomach. Battling Sylvester's illusion just ten minutes ago had been terrifying enough—he wasn't ready for a real encounter with him now.

The knock came again.

Uneasy, Daniel hesitated before slowly approaching the door and opening it.

Olivia stood outside.

For a brief moment, her eyes flickered to Daniel's bare torso. A slight smirk tugged at her lips as she looked back up at his face.

"You really should take Leader Holloway's advice and spend more

time in the gym," she teased.

Daniel stared at her, still trying to process her expression.

Dressed in an elegant nightgown, she looked as captivating as ever.

"Can I come in?" Olivia asked. "There's something I need to tell you."

"Of course," Daniel replied quickly, pulling the door open wider. He stepped back, letting her inside.

Olivia entered the room and settled onto the couch, nudging aside Daniel's casually discarded jacket and sweater.

"Sit down," she said.

Daniel's heart pounded like he had just finished a marathon. He shut the door slowly and walked toward the couch, unable to take his eyes off Olivia. He searched her gaze for a clue about what she wanted to talk about. The lingering headache and burning in his chest had completely left his mind.

He knew that whatever words left her lips next would shift everything he was feeling.

He sat down, filled with anticipation.

"I need you to listen to me carefully, all the way through," Olivia said, clearing her throat slightly.

Daniel's eyes sparkled with excitement.

All other thoughts evaporated.

He assumed she was about to confess something about her feelings for him, and he nodded, eager to listen. He focused entirely on her lips, waiting for the words to fall from them.

This was the first time he had seen her so hesitant and unsure of what to say.

"Sylvester…" Olivia began.

The glow in Daniel's eyes dimmed instantly. His palms grew sweaty, and the excitement was replaced by tense curiosity.

"I need to tell you what's happening between Sylvester and Brenda," Olivia said. "We have to find a solution—immediately."

Daniel's romantic expectations crumbled. In their place, a sharp, uneasy focus took over as he locked onto Olivia's words.

She struggled to find a starting point. Her hands clasped tightly together as she avoided eye contact.

"I promised Brenda I wouldn't say anything, but I have to, Daniel. This has to stay between us. Please."

The tears pooling in her eyes glistened under the dim light of the room. "There's no easy way to say this. So please, don't ask me anything, and don't let Brenda know that you know," she said, her voice trembling.

Daniel leaned in slightly and took her hand—not as a romantic gesture, but as a show of support for someone who had always seemed

so strong.

"Tell me, Olivia. It'll stay between us, I promise. Is she okay?"

"Just stay calm after you hear this, okay? We need to think logically and figure out a solution."

He nodded, but his patience was wearing thin. He needed to know what was going on—now.

A single tear escaped Olivia's eye, sliding swiftly down her cheek toward her chin. "Sylvester has been forcing Brenda to be with him since the very first day. Since her home," she said slowly.

Daniel froze. His lips parted, as if to say something, but no words came out. He didn't know what to say—he didn't even know what to think. He just stared at Olivia's face.

"Just think about what we can do," she urged, her voice calm but filled with sorrow. "Neither you nor I can be the one to save Brenda from Sylvester."

A wave of heat surged through him from his toes to his scalp. His heart pounded as if it were pumping lava instead of blood. His eyes burned with fury.

Brenda's face flashed in his mind. He imagined the moment Sylvester had forced himself on her. The thought of those honey-colored eyes filled with tears, combined with Sylvester's disgusting smirk, made his stomach churn. His breath caught in his throat. Rage consumed him.

In an instant, his hand shot toward the wristband bearing his symbol, which he had tossed onto the couch. As he stood, the crossbow materialized in his hands, glowing with energy. He hastily pulled his shirt over his head, already moving toward the door.

Olivia grabbed his arm in a panic. "Daniel! What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm going to kill him," he growled through clenched teeth.

"Don't be ridiculous!" she snapped. "Get a grip!"

"Let me go."

"No, Daniel."

"I said let go!" he shouted.

The sharp sting of pain flashed across his face, and he froze in place. The sound of Olivia's slap echoed in his ears.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, her voice now soft and full of sorrow. This time, her eyes were filled with tears—for him.

Daniel took a deep breath. The crossbow in his hands slowly faded, its glow dimming until it vanished completely. He let himself collapse onto the couch, his shoulders slumping. The rage inside him was so overwhelming that he finally understood—Olivia's slap had made him realize that any reckless action wouldn't bring him relief.

"Are you okay? I'm sorry," she repeated.

He nodded. His throat burned as if invisible hands were squeezing it. He knew that if he tried to speak, he would break down. It wasn't because of Olivia's slap—it was the sheer weight of what Brenda had been through.

For several minutes, he just sat there in silence.

Once the tightness in his throat eased slightly, he stood up with determination. "I'm going," he said, trying to steady the tremor in his voice.

"No!" Olivia's voice was louder and more forceful this time.

He stopped in place, but his gaze remained fixed on the door. "Not to Sylvester. I'm going to Leader Glisson."

"You can't," she said, quickly stepping toward him to stop him again. "Brenda confided in me. You can't just go and tell him."

"We need help," he insisted, turning to look at her.

"I know," she replied helplessly. "But we can't say anything without her permission."

"But you told me."

Olivia hesitated for a moment, staring directly into his eyes. She was trying to understand how he could be so blind.

She let out a deep breath, shaking her head in frustration.

"I told you because she's in love with you, Daniel."

***

The next morning, Daniel began one of the hardest days of his life.

To prevent Brenda from reading his mind, he spent breakfast and the morning meeting thinking about completely unrelated things. He tried his best to keep last night's revelations from creeping into his thoughts and avoided making eye contact with her as much as possible. He had also warned Olivia strictly about this.

"Don't even let it cross your mind that you told me about this," he had said.

Though Olivia didn't fully understand the reason for his harsh warning, she agreed.

Today, the intern group had been taken out of the main building—and even beyond the massive walls of the city. The barren landscape before them was scattered with steaming puddles, dreary shrubs, and a thick layer of fog. Despite it being morning, the area was completely devoid of sunlight, shrouded in a gray darkness.

After a journey of about half an hour, the minibus came to a stop in front of a wooden house. Had this two-story structure been anywhere else, rumors of it being haunted would have certainly spread alongside its presence. Nearly on the verge of collapse, its tightly boarded-up windows made it look like something straight out

of a horror film.

One by one, the interns were placed into separate rooms inside the house, and the doors were locked tightly behind them. At first glance, the rooms resembled those in an ordinary home, but the abandoned, eerie atmosphere was undeniable. After being locked in a stone chamber full of snakes before, everyone understood that something bad was about to happen again.

A few minutes later, Leader Holloway's deep voice echoed throughout the house:

"Set it on fire!"

The command reverberated through the building, and flames rapidly began consuming the wooden structure.

Daniel sank down by the window, realizing there was no escape. At the very least, he thought he could catch some fresh air through the gaps in the wooden planks. But thick gray smoke was already flooding the room, reducing his visibility.

Just then, Brenda's sudden scream jolted him.

He quickly scanned the room, checking for a snake or something similar slithering in. But the dense smoke clouded his vision completely. Unlike darkness, this fog erased everything around him. The sooty air burned his throat, triggering a violent coughing fit.

He pressed his face against the wooden slats covering the window and took a deep breath of whatever fresh air he could find.

Then he heard Brenda's voice again.

Through her sobs, she was crying out her mother's name.

The sheer desperation in her scream sent a deeper wave of unease crashing through him.

He tried to take another breath through the gaps in the wooden planks before attempting to move toward the door. But with his vision nearly nonexistent, he could only guess his way forward, taking a few tentative steps.

However, the door was in a completely different place than he had expected.

Breathing was becoming increasingly difficult. Desperately, he turned back toward the window.

As he struggled to find his bearings, the gray smoke in the room began darkening, turning black.

He could feel the ground beneath him growing hotter.

The heat beneath his feet became unbearable.

Suddenly, his balance gave way, and he collapsed onto the floor.

His vision blurred.

Darkness consumed him.

And then—nothing.

***

When Daniel regained consciousness, a familiar coldness spread through his body. His lips and throat felt parched, as if they had been glued together from thirst. Slowly, he forced his eyes open. Above him, the steady drip of an IV bottle hung in place.

As his vision cleared, he glanced around and noticed Malcolm Holloway seated in the chair beside him.

"Leader Holloway," Daniel murmured, shifting slightly in his bed.

"So, you're awake. Wait for the IV to finish," Holloway replied, his tone unusually calm.

"Why am I here?"

"We were going to come here after training anyway. You just got here a little earlier since you passed out."

Brenda's desperate scream echoed in Daniel's mind.

"Brenda… I heard her voice. Is she okay?" His concern was evident.

"All of your friends are fine, don't worry," Holloway said, his voice steady and confident. Then, with an unexpected hint of understanding, he added, "Intern Brenda Lewis lost her family in a fire. That's why she had a stronger reaction to this training."

Seeing Holloway's softened demeanor, Daniel realized this might be a rare opportunity to get some answers.

After a brief hesitation, he asked cautiously, "If a leader or an heir were to intentionally harm an intern… would there be consequences?"

Holloway's gaze sharpened as he studied him. The question had clearly caught him off guard. He seemed to be assessing Daniel's intent, trying to determine the reason behind it.

"It's not about today," Daniel added quickly, not wanting Holloway to associate the question with the fire and get angry.

For once, Leader Holloway didn't evade the question.

"Of course," he replied evenly. "Interns are part of Nivorum's personnel."

He paused before adding, "Sylvester's attack on you was punished. An heir's suspension is a far greater punishment than you might realize."

Daniel gave a slight nod. He hadn't asked that question for himself —but for what Brenda had been through. Holloway's assurance sparked a flicker of hope within him.

Maybe he really could find a way to free Brenda from Sylvester.

He opened his mouth to explain everything—but hesitated.

"What if the attack was done in secret?"

Holloway continued to hold his gaze, as if trying to decipher the thoughts behind the question.

After a few seconds of silence, he finally spoke. “Look, I don’t know what’s going through your mind. But I want you to be aware that I value you more than most here.”

Then, he reached for the IV bottle and lightly tapped it with his fingernail, listening to the faint chime it produced.

“Listen to me carefully. Sylvester’s file clearly states that he attacked an intern. No matter how powerful someone is in Nivorum, breaking the rules never ends well. That’s why I’ll need to appoint a new heir soon…”

He trailed off, his eyes drifting back to the IV.

“You’d better be ready for that day.”

Daniel sat up abruptly, his eyes widening as he tried to process what he had just heard. His mind struggled to accept it as reality.

“You want to make me your heir?”

“Let’s just hope your file doesn’t include an attack on an heir, kid.”

With that, Holloway calmly stood and walked toward the door.

When he reached the threshold, he paused for a moment but didn’t turn around. His voice carried a firm seriousness as he spoke.

“If someone in Nivorum breaks the rules, they are only punished with concrete evidence.”

“Once your IV is finished, you can return to your floor.”

Holloway opened the door and stepped out, leaving behind a deep silence—

And a storm of conflicting thoughts swirling in Daniel’s mind.

***

Pressing a cotton ball against the spot where he had removed the IV, Daniel stepped out of the elevator onto the thirteenth floor. His body still ached slightly, but this time, the effects of the serum didn’t feel as intense as before. Quickening his pace, he headed straight for the lounge area.

As he opened the door and stepped inside, Olivia were already looking in his direction.

The moment she saw him, she shot up from her seat and rushed toward him. She had sensed his arrival even before the elevator reached their floor.

“Are you okay?” she asked, gripping his arm, her tone laced with worry.

“I’m fine, don’t worry,” Daniel replied quietly. Everything he had learned in the past two days had twisted into a tangled knot inside his mind. He hesitated before asking, “Is Brenda not here?”

“She’s in the library,” Olivia said. “She had a rough day.”

Daniel nodded. “Good. I need to talk to you about something,” he

said, his voice serious. His gaze flicked briefly from Olivia to Kevin. “It’s private.”

Kevin groaned in irritation. He was already annoyed about being left alone over the weekend, and now he was being pushed aside again. With a scowl, he shot Daniel a resentful look before stomping out of the room without a word.

“We need to find proof,” Daniel said.

Olivia raised an eyebrow, studying his face carefully. She took a deep breath, then sank into the couch and leaned back.

“This is about Brenda,” he added quickly. “About what Sylvester has done to her.” Just saying the words made his stomach twist. His jaw tightened.

Olivia’s curiosity deepened, her full attention locked onto him. She remained silent, waiting for him to continue.

“I talked to Leader Holloway,” he said.

“Did you tell him?” she suddenly shot to her feet, her voice trembling with anger. Her piercing gaze bore into him.

“No. Calm down. Sit,” he said gently, guiding her back toward the couch.

She slowly sat again, but the sharpness in her eyes didn’t fade for a second.

“I only asked what would happen if a leader or an heir harmed an intern. I didn’t mention any names.”

“And?”

“And… he said if there’s proof, they’ll be punished.”

Olivia narrowed her eyes. “Do you seriously believe Leader Holloway would punish his own heir?” she asked, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

“They punished him for attacking me.”

“They only suspended him, Daniel,” she snapped. “A suspension won’t be enough to save Brenda.”

Daniel took a deep breath. He was still hesitant about sharing what Holloway had told him. He wasn’t entirely sure how serious the leader had been.

But in the end, he decided to say it.

“Holloway is considering making me his new heir.”

Olivia’s eyes widened in shock. She leaned forward slightly.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

Daniel recounted everything that had happened in the IV room and his conversation with Leader Holloway in painstaking detail. He explained the purpose behind the strange meals they had been eating, the IVs that enhanced their abilities, and the significance of Sylvester’s record being tarnished. Finally, he shared the part where Holloway had subtly implied that he would be made an heir.

When he finished, he said, “Now we need to focus on the proof.”

To him, nothing else mattered more than Brenda’s situation.

“What if Brenda just goes and tells them everything?” Olivia suggested.

He shook his head. “We’d need to prove she’s telling the truth.”

“How would we even prove something like that? I mean… I don’t know…” Olivia’s voice grew quieter. Her expression was a mix of sorrow and deep-seated rage. “…something like a… sperm sample?”

Daniel’s fists clenched at her words.

Brenda’s tear-streaked face flashed through his mind again, accompanied by Sylvester’s disgusting smirk.

Struggling to contain his rage, he said through gritted teeth, “I don’t know.” His voice was sharp. “If we can find any proof, we can save her from Sylvester.”

“There is proof,” said a third voice.

Both Daniel and Olivia flinched. Their eyes darted toward the lounge area’s doorway.

Neither of them had realized Brenda was there.

Olivia had been so consumed by her hatred for Sylvester, so overwhelmed by her fury, that even her sharp abilities had dulled.

Brenda stood against the wall beside the door, her expression a storm of emotions.

The hatred and disgust she felt toward Sylvester… The disappointment and betrayal burning inside her because Olivia had told Daniel her secret… The shame of knowing that the man she liked had learned everything… And the gnawing fear that he might distance himself from her now…

It all tangled together, twisting her heart in a whirlwind of emotions.

“There’s a videotape,” Brenda said, her voice trembling.

She hesitated, swallowed hard, then added, “One night when he came to me… he recorded everything.”

As if reliving those moments, her eyes welled with tears. She pressed her teeth against her lips, desperately trying to hold them back, but the weight of everything she had endured was too much.

The moment she closed her eyes, the floodgates broke.

Tears streamed down her face.

Daniel stood up, took a few steps toward her, and gently pulled her into a hug.

Not being able to do anything more than hold and comfort her—someone so innocent, so fragile—filled him with a deep, gnawing sense of helplessness.

The warmth of his embrace sent a shock through Brenda.

She had convinced herself that he would pull away—distance

himself.

Yet now, for the first time, he was holding her so sincerely.

But her heart was too exhausted, too wounded, to feel happy about it.

"Don't cry," Daniel murmured softly. "I'll find a way. I promise—you're going to be free of that freak."

Brenda slowly rested her head against his chest.

She had nothing left to say.

All she wanted was for this moment to last forever—to freeze time right here.

A faint sound of crying came from Olivia, who was still sitting on the couch.

The more she put herself in Brenda's place, the tighter her chest felt.

"Oh, come on, not you too. I can't handle all of you at once," Daniel said with a faint, half-hearted smile, trying to lighten the heavy mood.

But the dampness spreading across his clothes told him his efforts weren't working.

Brenda's tears had nearly soaked his shoulder.

He hesitated for a moment before shifting to a more serious tone.

"Where is the videotape?" he asked.

Brenda took a shaky breath.

"He keeps it in his room."

***

During dinner, a heavy silence loomed over the thirteenth floor. Apart from Kevin, no one was eating. They merely pushed their food around their plates, the air of misery settling over the table like a dark shadow.

Daniel decided to break the silence with an idea that was hard to accept. Taking a deep breath, he said with determination, "I'm going to get that videotape."

"What videotape?" Kevin asked, frowning. He was still oblivious to what was happening, struggling to understand the dynamics playing out between the three of them.

"It's none of your business. Forget it," Daniel said quickly, brushing him off.

Kevin was far from satisfied with that answer. Scowling, he turned back to his food, stabbing at the rose petals on his plate as if taking out his frustration on them. Being left out of everything was starting to get on his nerves.

Daniel noticed Kevin's frustration, but there was nothing he could

do. He couldn't tell him that Sylvester had forced himself on Brenda. He couldn't tell him that Glisson had secretly shown them the truth about Nivorum. He had no choice but to let Kevin stew in his irritation and refocus on the real issue.

"We know where it is. We just need to figure out which floor and which room," he said, his voice clear and firm. He turned to Brenda, the only person who might have an answer, locking eyes with her.

Brenda took a sip of her water before responding in a quiet voice. "I only know the floor."

Olivia listened, a growing weight pressing down on her chest. The thought of Daniel sneaking into Sylvester's room to steal the videotape didn't sit well with her. The risk of getting caught was too high, and the consequences… she didn't even want to imagine them.

But then she glanced at Brenda—and all her doubts vanished in an instant. They couldn't leave her trapped here, forced to obey Sylvester for the rest of her life, in a city with no escape.

"Are you sure about this?" she asked, fixing her gaze on Daniel.

Daniel nodded firmly. His expression made it clear—his mind was already made up.

Realizing that the plan was now set in motion, Brenda felt the need to intervene. "No. I don't want you to do this," she said. The fear that hadn't been seen on her face for a long time had returned. "It's too risky."

"I don't care," Daniel snapped, his voice hardening. "I won't let him—" He stopped mid-sentence, realizing Kevin was still listening. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to suppress his anger. "We'll talk about this later," he said, lowering his voice.

"Daniel, please," Brenda pleaded, her tone desperate.

The idea that a girl who had spent every night terrified—forced to endure Sylvester's twisted desires—was now trying to protect him at the cost of her own safety only strengthened Daniel's resolve. Slowly, he stood up and stepped closer to her. Lowering his head slightly, he whispered so softly that only she could hear, "I need to check something. What floor?"

The warmth of Daniel's breath against her ear sent a swarm of butterflies into Brenda's stomach. For a fleeting moment, her fears, worries, and the chaos in her mind disappeared. It was as if she had fallen under a spell.

"The top floor," she murmured, barely above a whisper. The words escaped her lips before she could even think.

Daniel immediately left the dining room, heading straight for the elevator. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the symbol Leader Glisson had given him. As he stepped inside, he held the symbol against the scanner.

One by one, all the floor buttons lit up.
And the button marked ‘110’ began to glow.

CHAPTER IX

VIDEOTAPE

After a few intense days, they met in the library as planned, at Brenda's request. To shake off Kevin, they had all first retreated to their rooms, only to sneak back to the library an hour later.

It was Brenda who broke the silence. Struggling slightly, she placed a heavy book on the table—one she had borrowed from Leader Glisson. "I'm certain no other intern has seen this book," she said, adjusting her glasses before flipping through the pages.

Daniel and Olivia leaned over her shoulders, watching as numbers, lines, and grids appeared, but it was obvious neither of them understood what they were looking at.

Brenda stopped on a page labeled "110A" in the top right corner. "Here it is. Get closer," she said.

The two leaned in further, yet they still couldn't make sense of what they were seeing. They kept staring blankly at the page, waiting for an explanation.

"It's a floor plan," Brenda said, exasperation creeping into her voice. When she was met with two vacant expressions, she let out a deep sigh and shook her head. Keeping her finger wedged between the pages like a placeholder, she quickly flipped to another section of the book.

"This is our floor," she said without looking up. Dragging her finger over a long rectangle, she added, "The corridor." She tapped one of the boxes lightly. "This is where we are now." Then, pointing to the adjacent box, she continued, "The gym. Got it?"

Daniel raised an eyebrow. "Right, there was a gym here, wasn't there? Has anyone ever actually used it?"

"Focus, Daniel!" Brenda snapped, shooting him an irritated look over the top of her glasses.

She quickly flipped back to the previous page and pointed to the upper section. 'This is the floor you're trying to break into,' she said, her voice now more serious.

The three of them studied the page carefully.

Thanks to Brenda's guidance, they quickly figured out how to read the layout. As she explained the locations of rooms, staircases, and hallways, they realized the 110th floor was vastly different from their own.

The thirteenth floor was relatively simple—four apartments and a

few shared spaces.

But the top floor was more like an independent house.

It even had its own second level.

“Alright, but which one is Sylvester’s room?” Daniel asked, studying the page closely.

“The one with double doors,” Olivia answered immediately, tapping her finger over the lines representing the staircase. “Upstairs.”

Daniel lifted his head from the book and turned to Olivia, a slight smile forming on his lips. “How do you know that?” he asked.

Olivia grinned mischievously. “Heir Cooper is a very polite young man. He answers all my little curiosities,” she said, locking eyes with Daniel, clearly enjoying his small bouts of jealousy.

Daniel’s smile faded instantly. The thought of Olivia and Heir Cooper chatting alone stirred an unpleasant feeling inside him.

But his gaze soon drifted to Brenda’s finger, where the ring with the vulture symbol rested.

The bird’s cold, unblinking eyes seemed to drain his jealousy—only to replace it with a deeper hatred toward Sylvester.

This ring wasn’t just a symbol of the city; it was a mark of the dark bond between Brenda and Sylvester.

Daniel quickly pushed Olivia’s comment from his mind and refocused on the book.

Brenda flipped over the large page, scanning a new section labeled “110B.” She traced her finger along a single box with two dashed lines. "If it’s a double-doored room, then it’s here,” she said.

Trying to steady both himself and his voice, Daniel said, “We need to be sure he’s not in his room.” His tone was still a bit tense.

“We already are,” Brenda replied. “He goes out on Friday nights.”

“Which means tonight,” Daniel said, finally understanding why Brenda had gathered them.

***

Until midnight, Daniel worked on memorizing every detail of the 110th floor’s layout. Brenda pointed out potential hiding spots in case of danger, while Olivia shared tactics she had learned from past experiences and their training—how to move unseen, how to detect someone approaching.

As the time drew near, sweat began to form on Daniel’s forehead. Stress coiled tightly around his chest. He was dressed in black tactical clothing, hoping it would make him less noticeable in the dark rooms.

Finally, the three of them stepped into the corridor and made their way to the elevator. No one spoke. The only sounds in the hallway were their uneven breaths and the pounding of their hearts. The

uncertainty in the air was so thick it felt almost tangible.

As Daniel stepped into the elevator, he first caught Olivia's gaze—filled with a silent wish for luck. He closed his eyes briefly in acknowledgment. Then his eyes met Brenda's.

He had seen her pale with fear many times before, but this time was different.

She was as white as a sheet of paper.

Brenda took a step forward and grasped Daniel's hands. "You don't have to do this," she said, her voice trembling. "Not for me, don't—"

Daniel didn't let her finish. "I'm not doing this because I have to," he said, determination shining in his eyes.

"Please be careful and… come back," Brenda whispered, pulling him into a tight embrace.

Her eyes were already brimming with tears; she was barely holding them back. A strange warmth spread from her elbows to her fingertips—something she had never felt before.

It was as if her arms were burning from the inside out.

She inhaled deeply, taking in Daniel's scent, then turned abruptly and ran toward the library without looking back.

Daniel stood motionless, watching her disappear down the corridor.

For a fleeting moment, he could have sworn he saw Brenda's fingers glowing red-hot, tiny sparks flickering from her fingertips.

But before he could be sure, he shook the thought away and refocused.

Pulling out the symbol Leader Glisson had given him, he scanned it against the elevator panel. Then, he securely pinned it inside his collar.

The buttons on the panel lit up from top to bottom in a cascading glow.

With steady resolve, Daniel pressed the button for the 110th floor.

"He turned to Olivia and gave her a small smile. 'If I don't come back—'

'You will,' Olivia cut in firmly, her eyes shining with hope. 'Brenda needs you.'

Daniel nodded silently, swallowing hard before whispering, 'But if I don't… find a way to protect her from Sylvester. Please.'"

"I will," Olivia said, her voice soft yet unwavering. "I promise."

***

The number 109 on the door shifted to 110. The elevator jolted to a stop.

Daniel was so tense that he had spent the entire ride gnawing at

the skin along his fingers, breaking it in places until it bled. Taking a deep breath, he slowly slid the iron guards aside and peered through the glass panel of the second door.

The entire floor was pitch-black. No sign of anyone.

In his mind, he tried to recall the floor plan Brenda had taught him. He struggled to transform the lines he had seen on paper into three-dimensional walls within the space he now occupied.

As they had anticipated, the door opened into a wide hall. Two large rooms should have been on either side. Daniel compared what he saw to the book Brenda had shown him—it matched the plan perfectly. Taking another deep breath, he stepped inside.

The doors to the two rooms on the right were closed. However, when he glanced to the left, he sucked in a sharp breath.

A dim, flickering orange light spilled from one of the rooms.

Instinctively, he retreated on his toes, pressing his back against the closed elevator doors.

The staircase, just as planned, was ahead on the left. Sticking to the strategy he and the girls had devised earlier, Daniel moved along the wall and crept toward the lit room's door. He stole a glance through the glass panel.

Bookshelves lined the walls. A reading room or a personal library. His gaze swept over the space—then froze.

He had only seen that face once before, but it had burned itself into his memory.

It was her.

The woman who had stepped onto the balcony with Vulton Valtorin on Daniel's first day in Nivorum.

Lady Valtorin sat in a leather armchair beneath the bookshelves, studying an old-looking book—one that seemed just as weighty as those in Leader Glisson's office. The glow of the fireplace cast a dramatic reflection on her face and surroundings, the flickering flames giving the illusion that her white hair was turning gold. Clad in a short, black satin nightgown, she looked effortlessly stunning.

Daniel dropped to the floor and scurried past the door in a duck-walk. For the first time, the grueling military trainings his father had forced on him was proving useful. Once across the hall, he silently tiptoed toward the staircase.

Reaching the upper floor, he found the layout matched the plan exactly—a room immediately to the right and a long corridor stretching left. At the end of the hallway, a lone door stood out. But the real focus was the grand, double-doored room positioned diagonally across from him.

According to Olivia's intel, that room belonged to Sylvester.

Daniel moved toward the door with quick yet silent steps, keeping

a constant watch on the room to his right. If his estimates were correct, that was the Valtorins' bedroom. If the Supreme Leader suddenly stepped out, it wouldn't just ruin the mission—it would end Daniel's life.

At last, he reached the door and placed his hand on the handle. His heart pounded so hard it felt as if it were lodged in his throat. The oxygen he inhaled reached his lungs in ragged, uneven bursts. His palms were drenched in sweat. Tension, fear, and stress tangled together in his body.

Slowly, and as soundlessly as possible, he eased the door open.

The first thing he did was glance at the bed in the middle of the dark room. Empty.

He exhaled deeply. Brenda's intel had been just as reliable as Olivia's.

Daniel left the door slightly ajar. It was crucial to hear any sounds from outside. Then, he began scanning the room. Cluttered. He had no idea where to start.

The bed was against the wall to the left of the door. Directly across from it stood an old cabinet with a massive television on top. Behind the television, towering windows offered a breathtaking view of Nivorum, along with a balcony door.

For a moment, Daniel couldn't stop himself from staring. The sight was mesmerizing. He had seen a similar view from the floor where they had taken him for an IV, but this was much higher. Hundreds of tiny lights shimmered far below.

For a fleeting second, he forgot about his mission entirely.

Snapping himself back to focus, Daniel turned toward the large wardrobe across from the door and pulled it open.

Dozens of long coats, the kind he had seen Sylvester wear, swayed on their hangers. The lower shelves were lined with identical pairs of jeans and combat boots. He rummaged through the drawers, checked the back of the closet—nothing.

His gaze swept the room. A small bookshelf. A desk. Various shelves. A nightstand.

No matter how carefully he searched, the videotape was nowhere to be found.

A sinking feeling told him time was running out. He realized he had wasted precious minutes searching the wrong places. The first spot he should have checked was the area around the television.

He rushed toward the foot of the bed and pulled open the glass doors of the cabinet beneath the TV. Inside, a large gray box with multiple buttons immediately caught his attention. The labels below the buttons—Play, Stop, Rewind—made it clear: This was a video player.

It was the first time in his life he had ever seen a physical video player.

Daniel pressed the power buttons on both the player and the television. To ensure he left no trace of his presence, he activated both using the symbol Glisson had given him. He wasn't even sure if his intern badge would have been enough to turn them on.

The machine whirred to life with a raspy noise, the kind that might come from an old, malfunctioning device. On the TV screen, the message flashed in large letters, repeating over and over:

"Insert a videotape."

A wave of despair washed over him. The player was empty.

He slammed the glass lid shut in frustration, feeling as if his last hope had just slipped through his fingers.

But at that moment, something caught his attention.

Reflected in the glass panel beneath the TV, he saw it.

A box, tucked under the bed.

Daniel dropped to the floor and pulled the box toward him. Lifting the lid, he found dozens of videotapes inside. Normally, he wouldn't have recognized them, but Brenda had spent hours describing their appearance in detail.

There were no labels or markings. Taking them all was impossible. Besides, he didn't even have a device in his own room to play them.

Without wasting time, he placed the box on the bed, grabbed one at random, and swiftly inserted it into the player. Then, he pressed Play.

The first videotape showed a large crowd gathered in a circle. In the empty space at the center, two men were fighting. He wasn't particularly interested in combat sports, but something was off—there was no referee. Yet, the spectators didn't seem to care. Because these men weren't trying to defeat each other.

They were trying to kill each other.

His gaze locked onto one of the fighters—a man with long hair. The one mercilessly beating his opponent was none other than Sylvester. The blood-chilling sight made Daniel flinch. He quickly pressed Stop and ejected the videotape.

The second videotape was different. This time, the camera captured a sleek, luxurious bathroom. A few seconds later, someone stepped into the frame—a woman, moving slowly toward the camera. It was obvious she had no idea she was being recorded.

First, her bare legs and hips came into view. Then, he noticed her snow-white hair.

For a moment, he couldn't look away.

The woman in the video was none other than Lady Valtorin.

The same woman he had just seen downstairs now stood naked in

the middle of the screen.

Disgust twisted his face as he whispered to himself, “Had he recorded his own mother?”

Revulsion churned in his gut, but he knew this videotape might be useful. Instead of putting it back, he quickly stuffed it into his pocket.

One by one, he watched more tapes, each more horrifying than the last. Sylvester’s sickening appetites were laid bare—experiments conducted on a dead body, torture sessions he had personally recorded, animals torn apart in the most brutal ways. Secret footage of unknown people in their private offices. Each videotape was a damning piece of evidence.

Then, he inserted yet another tape—one that sent a chill down his spine.

For a second, he wondered why his own room had been recorded. The camera was pointed directly at the bed. But instead of its usual mess, it looked strangely neat.

Then, realization struck.

The videotapes had distracted him so much that he had nearly forgotten why he was here in the first place.

This wasn’t his room.

It was Brenda’s.

His breath caught. The air burned as it passed through his parched throat.

After a brief silence, Brenda’s pale face appeared on the screen. A silent cry for help echoed in her honey-colored eyes. As the camera pulled back further, her timid, naked body came into full view.

Daniel recoiled.

Then, like a shadow, Sylvester stepped into the frame. He moved toward Brenda slowly. The plea in her eyes turned into a silent scream. Her lips didn’t move, yet Daniel could hear her desperate voice clearly in his mind.

As a wave of sickening pleasure spread across Sylvester’s face, Brenda could do nothing but cry.

Almost in sync with her, tears began streaming down Daniel’s face as well.

He quickly pressed Stop and ejected the videotape.

The cassette in his hand felt as if it weighed hundreds of kilos.

“Why are you crying? Is she not attractive enough when she’s naked?”

Daniel flinched at the voice, jolting upright. He immediately recognized it. The moment the words registered in his mind, his stomach twisted, and he barely held back the urge to vomit.

Sylvester stood in the doorway, his expression amused as the dim glow of the television illuminated Daniel’s face.

“Why do you look so shocked? Shouldn’t I be the one surprised that you’re sneaking around my room?” he said, his grotesque grin widening. “Fortunately, Nivorum’s moles are quite efficient.”

A flood of unanswered questions rushed through Daniel’s mind.

How was he going to escape? How would he put the videotape back with the others? What would he do if he had to defend himself?

And most importantly—who had told Sylvester he was here?

No answer led to a logical solution.

Sylvester’s voice slithered through the air, stretching out his words with chilling calmness. “Now, what should I do with you?”

Daniel rose from the bed, letting himself move with the flow of events. His hand darted to his wristband.

Time seemed to slow. His mind was writing the scene before it unfolded.

He would summon his crossbow from the symbol on his wrist, shoot Sylvester right in the center of his forehead, and then retreat to the floor below. The weapon would vanish on its own, leaving no trace behind.

But before he could act, an unbearable burning sensation erupted in his right arm.

Sylvester had already used his own symbol.

Two whips, formed from stardust, shimmered in his hands. Without hesitation, he struck—the first blow landing directly on Daniel’s right arm.

Pain exploded from his shoulder to his wrist, so intense it blurred his vision. Daniel expected Sylvester’s whip, made of pure light, to release him after the impact. But instead, the opposite happened.

The whip coiled tightly around his arm like a rope.

It constricted from below his elbow, binding him, then rapidly slithered down to his wrist and yanked hard.

Daniel’s wristband snapped off and tumbled through the air, landing right at Sylvester’s feet.

A disgusting grin spread across Sylvester’s face, satisfaction written all over him. He dropped his whips, letting the beams of light slowly fade into nothingness.

Bending down, he picked up Daniel’s wristband from the floor and twirled it between his fingers. His smirk widened. With quiet delight, he walked over to the window and slid it open. Then, without hesitation, he flung the symbol out from the highest floor of the main building.

Watching it fall, he said in a mocking tone, “Looks like you’re in trouble, intern.”

Daniel had no idea what to do. He hadn’t expected Sylvester to strike so quickly. He felt defenseless. Powerless. Now, he was at the

mercy of this sadistic man—a man who clearly didn't possess even the slightest trace of mercy.

Without warning, Sylvester drove his first punch straight into Daniel's stomach.

A choked gasp escaped his throat as he doubled over in pain, spit flying from his lips. He was still clutching the videotape—the one holding the evidence of what Sylvester had done to Brenda.

"I like seeing you bow before me, Daniel. Maybe you should kneel."

Sylvester's smirk deepened. Then, lifting his elbow, he struck the back of Daniel's neck with brutal force.

The impact sent Daniel crashing to his knees. A searing pain shot through his spine, radiating from his nape down his entire back. Tears welled up in his eyes from the agony.

Sylvester burst into laughter, the sound grating on Daniel's nerves. "Good job, intern, you're learning," he sneered.

But his voice suddenly shifted. It darkened, dripping with malice, as if pulled straight from a horror film.

"Now, I wonder—are you curious about how my boot tastes?"

This time, Sylvester swung his leg forward with all his strength, landing a vicious kick to Daniel's face.

The force sent him sprawling onto his back in the middle of the room, blood spurting from his mouth. A bitter, metallic taste flooded his tongue, coating the inside of his mouth. Coughing violently, he struggled to spit out the blood clogging his throat. Groaning in pain, he turned to the side and spat onto the floor.

Sylvester tilted his head, watching him with feigned disappointment. "Don't dirty my room, intern," he sighed before inhaling deeply, then added mockingly, "But there's nothing quite as pleasant as the scent of blood."

Daniel felt like it was over. His heart pounded so violently it threatened to shatter his ribcage.

At best, Sylvester would kill him right here.

At worst, he would drag him into something far more terrifying than death.

These thoughts swirled chaotically in Daniel's mind as he struggled to push himself up. But before he could rise, the sole of Sylvester's boot slammed into his face once more.

A searing pain exploded in his nose, sending a blinding shock through his skull. His vision wavered—black spots danced before his eyes, threatening to pull him into unconsciousness. But he hadn't lost consciousness just yet. He could still feel the warmth of blood trickling from his nose, down his lips, and onto his chin.

Just as he was trying to regain control, two ice-cold hands grabbed

his collar.

Sylvester yanked him up mercilessly, his breath hissing through his teeth as he spat, “Now… give me the videotape.”

Daniel’s fingers clenched tightly around it. He was using every ounce of strength he had, refusing to let go of Brenda’s ticket to freedom. He pulled it behind his back, keeping it out of Sylvester’s reach.

“So, you’re not giving up,” Sylvester said, his grotesque grin stretching across his face. His mocking laughter filled the room as he yanked Daniel fully to his feet and delivered a vicious slap across his face.

The moment Sylvester’s palm struck him, a sharp bolt of pain shot through Daniel’s skull. The impact stung like a lash cracking across his cheek. He staggered backward, barely managing to stay on his feet. His back collided with the balcony door, and only then did he regain his balance.

Sylvester seized him by the throat and spat in his bloodied face with pure disgust. “You can’t even imagine how much pleasure your little friend gave me while she cried in bed,” he taunted, his voice dripping with cruel amusement.

He knew exactly which nerve to hit. He relished the look of helpless fury in Daniel’s eyes, tightening his grip as if savoring every moment of his suffering.

Daniel’s face, already smeared with blood and spit, was turning a sickly shade of purple from lack of oxygen. He thrashed, his head jerking from side to side in a desperate attempt to breathe.

But inside him, something much worse than suffocation was building.

A rage so consuming, so explosive—he had no way to let it out.

Just when he was on the verge of blacking out, the pressure on his throat suddenly disappeared.

Gasping for air, Daniel inhaled in sharp, ragged breaths, each one sending searing pain through his raw throat. His body convulsed with violent coughs, his lungs burning as if they had been torn open. Bent over, struggling to regain control of his breath, he heard Sylvester’s laughter again.

“You know,” Sylvester mused, his voice thick with mockery, “Brenda made the same sounds when I was finished with her.”

Brenda’s broken image flashed in Daniel’s mind. He had seen only the first minute of that videotape—just a glimpse of what had happened. But now, with Sylvester’s words echoing in his head, every horrifying detail sharpened, becoming far too vivid to ignore.

A sickening emptiness settled in his stomach, replacing the pain with something even worse. His body heaved involuntarily, and a

bitter, acidic mix of bile and blood filled his mouth.

"If you want, we can make a deal, Daniel," Sylvester said, his voice almost playful. He reached down, gripping a handful of Daniel's hair and forcing his head up.

"Tell me how you got into this room… and I won't have to shoot the next video in Olivia Thompson's bed."

Daniel's eyes snapped open. The very thought of seeing Olivia and Sylvester together was unbearable, but imagining that scene—that shattered something inside him.

"Ah! Just as I expected," Sylvester said, his grotesque smile twisting into something even uglier. "Our intern likes older women, does he? I promise you, I'll satisfy her. She's going to enjoy it."

Daniel's bloodshot eyes widened with fury. A small spark of courage, buried deep within, ignited and spread through his body like wildfire, exploding all at once. Gritting his teeth, he summoned every ounce of strength and swung his arm.

The sharp corner of the videotape in his hand struck Sylvester hard at the edge of his lip.

Sylvester stumbled back a step, caught off guard by the sudden attack. A sharp sting flared in his lip, and when he ran his fingers over it, he saw blood pooling at his fingertips.

More than pain, it was humiliation.

In his own city. In his own home. In his own room. By his own videotape.

An intern had struck him.

The disgrace cut deeper than any wound. His fury became uncontrollable as he bared his teeth and spat through clenched jaws, "You son of a bitch!"

He lunged at Daniel, driving a vicious kick straight into his chest.

For a brief moment, Daniel thought he was having a heart attack. The deep pain in his ribs was sharper than even the sting of stardust invading his body. The force of the blow sent him reeling backward, and the balcony door behind him flew open.

He staggered. The French balcony was too narrow to stop his unsteady steps.

He struck the balcony ledge and toppled backward.

Plummeting from the top floor of the main building.

Daniel had felt this sensation before. Months ago, when he first came into contact with the stardust, he had been thrown from his motorcycle, suspended in the air for a few fleeting seconds.

Now, he was reliving it.

Gravity twisted through his body in chaotic waves. That day, it had been the stardust keeping his eyes shut. Today, it was the sheer pain of his injuries.

During free fall, for a brief moment, he wondered how many seconds it would take before he crashed into the ground from this height. As he tried to calculate how quickly time was running out, familiar faces began to appear in his mind.

The first image that came to him was Olivia in the library, the moment he had first seen her in her Nivorum formal attire. Then, Brenda's presence surfaced—he remembered how she had suddenly kissed him in the lounge area, then fled with flushed, embarrassed cheeks.

"So this is what they mean by your life flashing before your eyes," he thought.

Then, once again, he realized he was moving unconsciously.

The symbol had taken control of him before, forcing him to act against his own thoughts. But this time, his wristband wasn't with him—Sylvester had thrown it down long before he fell.

He had no idea what was causing his body to move involuntarily now.

His hand instinctively reached for his collar. As his fingertips brushed against something cold and sharp, he remembered—this was the symbol Glisson had given him.

The moment he touched it, a familiar sensation spread through his entire body.

The pull of gravity weakened.

From the tips of his fingers to the roots of his hair, his senses began to fade.

Everything in his mind was slowly dissolving.

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He had no way of knowing how long it took for him to regain consciousness, but the sharp pain coursing through his entire body made it feel like an eternity.

His bones ached, and a dark pool of blood was spreading beneath him. Right beside it, his wristband—bearing his own symbol—lay abandoned.

Groaning in pain, he reached for it, grabbed it, and slipped it into his pocket.

He knew he couldn't stay here any longer in case Sylvester decided to come down. Struggling, he tried to open his eyes, but the blows he had taken allowed only a sliver of vision. Slowly, his surroundings came back to him.

Sylvester's windows overlooked Nivorum City.

He figured he was on the pavement leading to the tunnel Oscar had taken him to, right beneath the main building. When he glanced

to his left, he could barely make out the stairs leading up to the entrance.

There was no one around to help him.

Not that it would have mattered—he couldn't exactly explain to anyone that he needed to get into a tunnel beneath a manhole cover.

He gathered what little strength he had and tried to push himself up, but his legs refused to cooperate. All he could do was scream in pain.

After falling one hundred and ten floors, he knew he had no right to complain.

For a fleeting moment, his mind drifted back to the past, to his high school years. He recalled his father tying his legs together and forcing him to complete obstacle courses by crawling. His elbows had become quite skilled at getting him from point A to point B.

Rolling onto his stomach on the pavement, he began to drag himself forward.

After about five minutes, he finally reached the cover of the tunnel leading to Fast Cups. The only way out he could think of was to reach Leader Glisson or Oscar.

Maybe one of them was the mole Sylvester had mentioned.

But he had nowhere else to go.

His hand wandered over the cover, feeling every inch of the cold metal. He had no idea how to open it. The only option that came to mind was to force it open, but even breathing was already a struggle.

He brought his lips close to the small holes in the cover, almost touching them.

"Leader Glisson… Oscar… help me."

His voice was so weak that it was impossible for anyone to hear. He didn't hold the slightest hope for a response.

The only sound he heard was the faint drip of blood falling from his face onto the metal.

After a brief moment of waiting, Glisson's symbol crossed his mind. Ever since he had taken it, it had proven useful in nearly every situation—and had even saved his life just moments ago.

Maybe it held the key to opening this cover as well.

Summoning the last of his strength, he reached for his collar and dropped the symbol into one of the small holes.

He hoped to see a light, for the cover to open on its own.

But instead, he heard a dull clink—the sound of the symbol hitting the ground.

His plan had failed.

By now, he didn't even have the strength to keep his head up. Taking a deep breath, he let his forehead rest against the cold metal. The blood that had pooled beneath him found its way back to his skin.

Slowly, every thought in his mind faded away—until there was nothing left.

CHAPTER X

RUIN

Daniel's consciousness stirred, dragging him from the depths of darkness. The scent of rotting wood and a smoky chill filled his lungs. His eyelids felt sealed shut, but the soft warmth around his hand grounded him, offering a small sense of comfort.

"Phoebe…" he whispered, his voice weak, strained.

The grip on his hand tightened slightly. "You're going to be fine, don't worry."

The words reached him as if through a thick curtain—muffled, distant. Everything felt hazy, unfocused.

"Where am I?" A faint groan escaped his lips. Every muscle in his body ached.

"You're home, sweetheart. With your mother."

The words froze him. He struggled to open his eyes, forcing them to part just enough to make out the blurred silhouette of an elderly woman.

"Mom?" he whispered.

"Yes, sweetheart. But don't strain yourself. Get some rest." Her voice was gentle, soothing. Then, she lifted a spoon to his lips. "But first, you need to drink this."

Cold metal pressed against his mouth. He slowly parted his lips, allowing the liquid to trickle in. The moment it touched his tongue, a bitter, burning taste spread through his mouth. He swallowed, letting out an involuntary whimper.

"This will make you better, my son. Just endure it a little longer."

Pain coiled in his chest, the burning sensation twisting inside him. He was utterly helpless. Before unconsciousness claimed him once more, he managed a weak nod.

The last thing he heard was the woman's soft whisper as she held his hand.

"I won't let your father take you away from me again."

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These awakenings were becoming routine for Daniel. Each time, the bitter taste of the liquid he drank seemed to fade slightly, and the pain in his body lessened along with it. He had lost track of how many times this cycle had repeated—drinking the medicine, drifting back

into sleep under the woman's gentle touch and soothing voice, then waking once more.

This morning, however, felt different. A rare sense of peace settled over him as he opened his eyes, comforted by the familiarity of his own room. Some of the newspapers taped to his window had been torn by the wind, their tattered edges fluttering as icy air seeped in. The plaster on the walls had crumbled in places, exposing jagged patches beneath.

Slowly, he sat up, running a hand over his body. Most of the pain had faded, leaving only a dull ache behind. His gaze drifted downward. A faint glow shone through the cracks between the worn wooden floorboards, revealing the lower level.

"Mom, are you there?" he called out.

A gentle voice answered from below. "Yes, sweetheart. I'll bring your medicine in a moment."

"I feel better. I can come downstairs," Daniel said, carefully pushing himself to his feet.

The moment he took his first step, his legs buckled. He had to steady himself against the wall, his muscles struggling to carry his weight after so long unused. As he leaned there, his eyes landed on a photograph.

A small, cheerful boy around five years old stared back at him, his bright blue eyes wide with energy. Below the photo, a name was scrawled in faded handwriting: HUGO.

"Hugo! Are you coming? Breakfast is ready," the woman's voice called from downstairs.

Daniel hesitated. Then, after a moment, he nodded. "Yes, Mom."

Slowly, he made his way down the worn-out stairs. The lower floor mirrored his room's decay. The wind sent the curtains billowing inward, and an old, tattered blue couch sat in the center of the room. The front door—ripped from its hinges—rested against the wall.

In the kitchen, behind the couch, the elderly woman was preparing breakfast.

She appeared to be in her sixties. Deep lines etched her face, and dark circles hung beneath her eyes. Her hair, once red, had faded to white at the roots, and she wore a set of pajamas as worn and threadbare as the house itself.

"Good morning, Mom," Daniel said with a warm smile.

The woman turned, studying him for a moment before her own smile grew. "You're finally up," she said, her voice soft with relief. "How do you feel?"

"Don't worry, I'm fine," Daniel assured her. Taking a deep breath, he caught the scent in the air and brightened. "Are you cooking sausages? I'm starving."

“You’ve been asleep for ten days,” she said. “You were in rough shape. Have you been living like some vagrant with your father, Hugo?”

Ten days? Daniel’s breath caught. His mind raced, trying to recall where he might have gotten into a fight. Closing his eyes, the memory surfaced.

“It happened at the fight club,” he muttered, picturing the ring of spectators around him.

“Fight club?” The woman sighed. “We’ll talk about that later, sweetheart.” She set down a heaping plate on the table.

Daniel’s eyes lit up. Grilled tomatoes, sausages, sautéed mushrooms, fried eggs, and crispy toast piled high before him.

“I haven’t had a breakfast like this in months,” he said, barely containing his excitement as he dug in, devouring the food as if he’d just come out of a famine.

“Sweetheart!” The woman chuckled. “No one’s going to take your food, Hugo. You’re going to choke.”

For the first time in what felt like forever, Daniel ate with a hearty appetite. After ten days of surviving only on the “medicine” his mother had given him, he had lost a noticeable amount of weight—leaving him thinner, weaker than before.

As Daniel finished the last bites of his meal, his gaze drifted once again to the front door.

“We can fix that,” he said with certainty.

The woman lowered her head slightly, her expression tinged with sorrow. “It’s not quite like your father’s luxurious house, is it?” she asked, her voice fragile. “Are you cold, sweetheart?”

“No, no…” Daniel quickly reassured her, unwilling to let her feel worse. He reached for her trembling hands, holding them gently. “Don’t say that, Mom. I’m happy to be here.”

She smiled faintly. “I’ve been waiting for this moment since you were seven, Hugo. Ever since your father took you away from me.”

“I’m sorry, Mom,” Daniel said, exhaling deeply. “But we’re together now.” He offered her a sincere smile before adding, “I don’t remember how I got here.”

The woman’s gaze darkened for a moment. “As much as I hate him, I have to keep moving forward, sweetheart. I had taken some of the medicine I made to the main building. On my way back, I found you lying on the ground, wounded.”

Daniel’s brows furrowed as he searched his memory. “I remember you used to make medicine for everyone when I was little,” he said, a faint smile crossing his lips.

“Your father didn’t want me around, but he could never give up my talent,” she said with a bitter smile. Then, after a pause, she

continued, “Even after all these years, I recognized you immediately. When I turned you over, a videotape fell from your jacket pocket.”

Daniel stilled. “You were the one who gave me my camera,” he said, meeting her eyes.

The woman nodded, her expression softening. “Yes,” she murmured as a single tear rolled down her cheek. “You would record every corner of the house all day long. You used to turn up the volume on your videotapes to drown out the fights between your father and me. I guess this one is from those days… a cartoon, maybe?”

Her voice broke. She couldn’t hold back any longer. Silent tears slipped down her face.

Daniel squeezed her hands gently. “It’s okay, Mom,” he said, his voice steady, reassuring. “It’s all over now. I’m here.”

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Daniel had settled into a flawless routine in the house. Every morning, he and his “mother” started the day with breakfast. Afterward, they sat in their tattered yet peaceful blue armchairs, sipping tea and chatting. Until dinner, they worked in the small garden behind the house, preparing medicine before returning inside to cook their meal. They spent their evenings together, making up for the time they had lost, until sleep finally took them.

It had been almost a week since Daniel woke up. With each passing day, he embraced this simple, happy life more and more. He didn’t remember anything about his old life. But every moment until the age of seven was crystal clear—down to the smallest details, like the glasses of the doctor in the delivery room or the scar on the soldier’s hand as he shoved his mother into the elevator. After that, everything was a void.

On Saturday morning, as Daniel sat at the table, savoring the breakfast his mother had prepared, he felt like the happiest person in the world. Just as he lifted his teacup to take a sip, a knock sounded at the door.

Thanks to Daniel’s repairs, the door was now working properly.

“Keep eating, sweetheart. I’ll get it,” the woman said, rising to her feet. She walked to the wooden door with slow, deliberate steps and pulled it open.

“Good morning, Lady Stewart,” said the man standing on the threshold. His voice was polite, his demeanor composed. He wore a long coat.

Daniel’s stomach twisted. He recognized that coat. The men who had forced his mother into the elevator all those years ago had worn

the same ones.

"Sorry to bother you," the man continued in the same polite tone. "The amount of medicine you delivered yesterday was higher than usual. Your payment was short. If you could stop by the main building today…"

"Alright," Lady Stewart replied curtly, her voice cold. She was eager to end the conversation and close the door.

But then the man's gaze drifted inside—and landed on Daniel.

For a few seconds, neither of them moved. They locked eyes.

"He's not Hugo," Lady Stewart said immediately, panic creeping into her voice.

The man stiffened at the name, as if she had uttered something cursed. His expression shifted. Clearing his throat lightly, he forced himself to regain composure. "I know he isn't," he said. "He just looked like a missing intern."

"I haven't heard of anyone missing," Lady Stewart replied, already pushing the door nearly shut.

Just then, the man spoke again. "Do you know Leader Holloway?"

The woman's hand froze mid-motion. Slowly, she turned her head, her gaze settling on Daniel.

For a moment, everything seemed to stop. Both she and the man stared at the young man sitting at the table, teacup in hand.

The name meant nothing to Daniel. He mentally ran through every name he could recall—Helena Stewart, Vulton Valtorin, Preston Valtorin, Daria Thomas, Phoebe Baker, Theodore Hudson, Luke Perry… Beyond those, nothing.

"No," Daniel said confidently. "I don't know anyone named Holloway."

Before the door could fully close, the man asked one last question.

"Are you Intern Milner?"

Daniel shook his head. "No," he said with the same certainty. "Good day, sir."

The man in the coat gave a slight nod. "Good day."

Lady Stewart shut the door. Outside, the sound of retreating footsteps faded into the distance.

"We're lucky he didn't recognize you," she murmured, lowering herself back into her seat. "We'll have to be more careful from now on. If your father finds out you're here, he'll come for you."

Daniel met her eyes, his voice firm. "Don't worry, Mom. I'm not going anywhere."

***

After dinner, Lady Stewart had gone to the main building to collect

her payment. A few hours later, she struggled through the doorway, carrying a large box in her arms.

Daniel immediately sprang up from the couch, hurrying to take the box from her. He set it down on the table, his voice laced with regret. “I wish I had gone instead of you.”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” Lady Stewart said with a tired but gentle smile. “Your mother isn’t that old yet. And I can’t send you there.”

“I know,” Daniel murmured.

As she sank into the blue couch, she gestured toward the box. “Open it. I have a surprise for you.”

Curious, Daniel lifted the lid. Inside, nestled on top of dozens of canned goods and packaged food, was a large video player—and several videotapes.

His breath caught. “Mom, this is…”

“Yes, sweetheart,” Lady Stewart said, watching him with a fond expression. “Luckily, one of these was available. I’ll bring the television in the morning.”

Daniel picked up one of the videotapes, running his fingers over its surface. A deep, indescribable excitement filled him. It was as if he had returned to his childhood, reliving one of those warm, distant days. Even the icy wind slipping through the cracks in the window couldn’t dim that feeling.

“How?” he asked, his voice eager.

“There should be one in the storage shed out back.”

“I can go get it,” Daniel said at once, already pushing himself up.

Lady Stewart shot him a worried look. “Are you sure, sweetheart? It’s really dark out there.”

“That’s not a problem for me,” Daniel said, a grin tugging at his lips. The moment the words left his mouth, he dashed toward the garden door, a burst of energy coursing through him. He felt light, like a child again.

“Slow down, Hugo! You’re going to fall!” Lady Stewart called after him, concern lacing her voice.

***

As Daniel stepped into the garden, he lifted his head. The main building loomed in the darkness like a monstrous shadow, its silhouette barely visible through the mist.

His gaze lingered on the top floor. He remembered sitting in that room as a child, watching cartoons with his mother, eating sweets, and basking in the warmth of the beautiful days they had shared. However, his mind drifted to the years he couldn’t remember—years

of being kept away from his mother. The day his father had thrown her out of the house for another woman surfaced in his memory.

A sharp anger flared in his chest. Letting out a low, frustrated grunt, he turned away and stepped into the pitch-black storage shed.

The air inside was thick with dust and neglect. Countless old items —large and small—cluttered every corner, draped in heavy cobwebs. It was clear that no one had touched them for decades.

Daniel scanned his surroundings, spotting fragments of his past among the chaos. His fingers brushed against a faded orange Volkswagen Beetle toy, half-buried under layers of dust. He took a deep breath and blew on it, sending a cloud of dust swirling into the air.

Then, his gaze landed on a row of tiny pants and sweaters hanging from a rusted pipe—his childhood clothes. Among them, a black sweater caught his attention. Stitched carefully into the fabric was a single letter: *H.*

Daniel ran his fingers over the embroidery, a small smile tugging at his lips. His mother had knitted these for him. The same H was stitched onto the left knee of his old pants.

Then, his eyes fell on something else—a handheld video camera, its screen cover left open.

For a brief moment, memories flooded back: filming Nivorum Square from the window as a child, capturing moments with his parents, and recording the games he played with Evelyn, Theodore, and Luke

The camera had been a gateway to those lost days.

Beside the dusty television, a few more old videotapes sat stacked in the dim light, waiting to be rediscovered.

***

Daniel placed the television and video player on the old coffee table, positioning them directly across from the tattered blue armchair. Working quickly, he connected the cables, adjusted the settings, and inserted one of the tapes Lady Stewart had brought. Satisfied, he sank back into the armchair.

All evening, they watched cartoons, the flickering screen casting a warm glow over the room. Popcorn, melted sweets, and the liquid medicine Lady Stewart insisted he drink accompanied their nostalgia. It felt as if they were reclaiming a day stolen from the past.

As the night stretched on, Lady Stewart let out a tired sigh. “I’m not young enough to sit for this long, sweetheart.” She pushed herself up from the armchair, ruffled Daniel’s hair, and headed for the stairs. “I’m going to bed,” she added, her voice carrying the weight of

exhaustion.

But after a few steps, she hesitated. Turning back, she stood there for a moment, watching the young man still engrossed in the flickering screen. A silent warmth passed through her gaze before she finally continued climbing the decayed stairs.

When the tapes Lady Stewart had brought ended, he switched to the dust-covered childhood tapes he had found in the shed. As the images played, each frame felt as vivid as if he had recorded them just yesterday.

His eyes locked onto the little girl with yellow braided hair on the screen. Sitting beside her was his own childhood self, wearing the sweater embroidered with the H.

Phoebe.

He wondered where she was now. His mind gave him no answers. The last thing he remembered was the moment Lady Stewart had been thrown out of the main building. It was as if the closing elevator doors had sealed off his memories along with her. The last time he had seen Phoebe had been earlier that same day.

As these thoughts swirled inside his head, a sudden flash of green light streaked through the broken window.

The moment Daniel's eyes met the light, his entire being slipped out of his control.

***

Daniel's consciousness slowly began to return. In the midst of the darkness, the overwhelming scent of aged furniture and dusty papers filled his lungs. The soft warmth around his hand brought him a small sense of comfort. His eyelids felt as if they had been sealed shut under an unbearable weight.

"Mom…" he whispered, his voice strained.

"He's awake!" Brenda's voice trembled with excitement. She tightened her grip around Daniel's hand. "He's coming to."

Daniel let out a deep groan, forcing his eyes open. Blurred shapes gradually sharpened into focus. Beside him, a girl sat holding his hand. Across the room, a man and a woman sat on opposite sides of an office desk, while another man stood near the exit.

Nothing and no one looked familiar.

"Where am I?" he asked, his voice weak but steady.

Brenda's eyes widened as she took in Daniel's fully opened gaze. A shiver ran through her. "His eyes… why are they blue?" she asked. The sight unsettled her—it felt both eerily familiar and completely unnatural.

"He's wearing lenses," Heir Cooper said flatly.

Brenda instinctively reached out with her mind, trying to enter Daniel's thoughts—but she hit a solid barrier. Nothing. Her pulse quickened. Panic crawled through her chest as she turned to Leader Glisson.

"Is he okay?" she asked, her concern evident.

Glisson rose from his chair, his expression unreadable as he stepped toward the couch where Daniel sat.

"He thinks he's someone he's not," he said gravely. "His mind is clouded."

A heavy silence fell over the room. Even Daniel hesitated, watching Glisson carefully.

Then, his voice cut through the quiet. "I know exactly who I am."

He yanked his hand away from Brenda and swiftly stood up from the couch.

"Sit down," Glisson ordered, his tone calm but firm.

Daniel ignored him and turned toward the door.

Glisson met Cooper's gaze and gave a slight nod.

Understanding the unspoken command, Cooper reached for the mask around his neck. A bright red light flashed, and in an instant, a long sword materialized in his hand.

Daniel flinched as the sudden brightness seared his vision. His steps faltered. "Calm down," he said warily, eyeing Cooper.

"Don't!" Brenda stepped forward, her voice urgent. "Don't hurt him."

Daniel had no idea why this girl—whom he had never met before—was reacting this way. He studied her, confusion flickering in his eyes.

"Calm down, Brenda," Olivia whispered. She stepped beside her and gently pulled her back. "Heir Cooper wouldn't hurt him."

Daniel barely heard them. He was still trying to piece together what was happening.

"Look, I don't know what you want from me, but I'm going back to my mother," he said sharply. His voice held barely contained anger. "If my father sent you—"

"Supreme Leader Valtorin is not your father!"

Glisson's outburst sent shockwaves through the room.

Silence fell like a crushing weight. The girls stared at Glisson in stunned disbelief, their expressions frozen between shock and fear.

They knew exactly who Vulton Valtorin's son was. And what they had just heard made no sense.

Glisson read the unspoken questions in their eyes. His jaw tensed. "He thinks he's Sylvester," he muttered, his frustration clear.

A synchronized gasp escaped Brenda and Olivia's lips.

Daniel's patience snapped. His fists clenched.

“Who the hell is Sylvester?” he demanded. “My name is Hugo Valtorin.”

Glisson inhaled deeply, forcing himself to remain composed. When he spoke again, his tone was measured, almost careful.

“Alright, Hugo,” he said. “Would you please sit down?”

Then, without breaking eye contact with Cooper, he added, his expression grim, “Only Andrew can fix this.”

***

Leader Glisson and Heir Cooper used the tunnel to bring Daniel back outside. Beyond the manhole cover, a van arranged by Oscar was already waiting. They climbed inside without hesitation, setting off toward the gateway.

When they arrived, they moved quickly, ascending the stairs leading to the glowing portal. Urgency propelled them forward—they needed to get out before anyone caught them.

Daniel’s expression remained completely blank under the influence of Leader Glisson’s glowing symbol. The light restricted him, leaving him capable of only the most basic physical and mental functions.

An old man standing beside the gateway eyed the unexpected visitors with curiosity. “Well, well, look who it is. I wasn’t expecting you,” he said, amusement lacing his voice.

“How are you, Morgan?” Leader Glisson greeted with a slight smile. “If you had been expecting us, we wouldn’t be in such a hurry.”

The old man nodded knowingly. “Another special journey?” he asked, stepping back a few paces from the shimmering screen. Then, in a playful tone, he added, “Mark Oscar, the stage is yours.”

Mark responded just as playfully. “Thank you, Morgan Wilson.” Without hesitation, he took control of the transparent screen. His fingers danced over the light, manipulating it with practiced ease. Within seconds, the gateway activated.

“Thank you, Morgan,” Leader Glisson said before stepping toward the portal.

Cooper and Oscar followed, entering the dimly lit corridor where the gateway pulsed with energy. Daniel moved behind them, his body following as if pulled by an invisible force.

The gateway opened atop a small island nestled between towering cliffs. The salty scent of the sea greeted them, mingling with the gentle breeze of spring. Unlike the cold, heavy air of Nivorum, the weather here was bright and warm.

“This place always brings me peace. I feel like I’m betraying Nivorum,” Cooper admitted, his gaze sweeping across the landscape.

“It’s not your fault, Timothy. The beauty here is mesmerizing,”

Leader Glisson replied. “But we must hurry. Give me the paper.”

Heir Cooper pulled out a thick, smooth sheet of parchment and handed it to Glisson. Embossed letters, written in an unfamiliar alphabet, covered its surface.

Glisson knelt, pulled out a lighter, and carefully set the paper ablaze. The thick parchment dissolved into a swirling cloud of smoke, its letters glowing as they scattered into the air. The shimmering words coalesced, forming a new gateway before them.

From within the portal stepped Andrew Hunt—short in stature, with a goatee, a hefty belly, and round sunglasses. He studied the four men before him, then smirked.

“Welcome, Lando.”

“Andrew,” Glisson greeted, stepping forward to shake his hand.

After the handshake, Hunt’s eyes flicked to Oscar. “Still dragging this old boar around just to use the gateways, aren’t you?” he teased.

“Unless you teach him how to make gateways out of paper, he’ll have to pray every night that I don’t drop dead,” Oscar replied, shooting Hunt a sharp look.

For a moment, silence stretched between them—then both men burst into laughter and embraced.

“Don’t worry, you won’t die that easily,” Hunt said with a smirk. Then he turned to Cooper. “You too, welcome.”

Cooper didn’t speak, only offering a slight nod in acknowledgment. Though he trusted his leader, he couldn’t help but find it odd how friendly Glisson was with someone who, on paper, was considered an enemy.

Finally, Hunt’s gaze settled on Daniel, who sat on the ground, absentmindedly playing with the grass.

“I hope you’re the one who dulled his mind,” Hunt remarked mockingly. “He looked more intelligent the last time I saw him.”

Glisson nodded. “We need your help, Andrew. He was unconscious for a long time—his mind filled with someone else’s memories. Right now, he believes he’s Sylvester.”

Hunt’s smirk faded slightly. “If you’d like, I can take him to the academy,” he offered, his voice lighter but measured. “Starting from scratch might be a good opportunity for him.”

Glisson met Hunt’s gaze, his expression resolute. “I need him, Andrew. But one day, he will be shaped by your knowledge. I promise you that.”

***

The hidden wall in Leader Glisson’s office slid open with a loud, mechanical groan. The two girls waiting inside turned toward the

sound just as Daniel and Cooper stepped in behind Glisson.

Brenda sat in the office chair, engrossed in one of Glisson's books. The moment she saw Daniel, she jumped to her feet and ran toward him.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her teary eyes shimmering with emotion. She was just about to throw her arms around him when she met his gaze—and froze.

Her expression twisted into mild dissatisfaction. Without even waiting for an answer, she muttered, "If you've come to your senses, please take those things out of your eyes."

Daniel blinked in confusion. "What's in my eyes?" He glanced between Brenda and Leader Glisson.

"A disgusting man," Brenda muttered under her breath, looking away.

Leader Glisson smiled faintly. "It would be best if you removed your lenses, Daniel."

Daniel frowned. "Why do I even have lenses in my eyes?" Still confused, he dropped into the chair across from the desk and started taking them out.

Glisson turned to the girls, who watched the exchange with curiosity. "Everything is fine, don't worry." Then, as Daniel finished removing the lenses, he nodded approvingly. "That's better."

Daniel inspected the contacts in his hand, shaking his head. "I don't remember ever putting these on."

"There's still something different," Brenda noted, studying his face carefully, as she had done countless times before. Pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose, she leaned in, scrutinizing him.

"His nose," she said after a beat.

Daniel's already prominent nose had shifted slightly, bent to the left from the blows he had taken from Sylvester.

Glisson stepped closer, resting a hand on the bridge of Daniel's nose. "Does it hurt?"

"No."

"That won't heal," Glisson said, grimacing slightly. "I hope you can find a girl who likes battle scars."

Brenda's face turned bright red in an instant. A smile tugged at her lips before she could stop it.

From her seat, Olivia caught Brenda's reaction and smirked. Even in such a complicated situation, the innocent, love-struck look on the younger girl's face amused her.

The brief silence was broken by Glisson, his voice taking on the tone of a father scolding a reckless child.

"What were you thinking, trying to get into Sylvester's room? Have you lost your mind?"

The atmosphere in the room shifted instantly. Daniel's eyes flicked toward Brenda. He wasn't sure what to say. Glisson still didn't know why he had done it. The girls hadn't told him. He hesitated, unsure whether he should be the one to reveal it.

All he could say was, "I'm sorry."

"We haven't told him yet, Daniel," Brenda said as she sat down next to Olivia. Her head was lowered, eyes fixed on the tip of her shoe. Her voice was quiet, timid—shrinking with every word.

The cheerful expression Olivia had worn just moments ago vanished. With a serious look, she squeezed Brenda's shoulder, offering silent support.

Glisson's sharp gaze moved between the three of them, his brows furrowed. There was a significant reason behind this. "Which one of you is going to explain?" he asked, moving to his armchair behind the desk. He rested his arms on the table, patient but expectant.

Olivia took a deep breath. Brenda didn't have the strength to explain. And it didn't feel right for Daniel to be the one to say it in front of her—it would only add more weight to the burden on the fragile girl's heart.

"Daniel, can we switch places?" she asked gently.

He nodded in understanding. Standing from his chair across from Glisson's desk, he moved to sit beside Brenda. Olivia took his vacated seat and, in a near whisper, recounted everything—from the moment Brenda first encountered Sylvester to the day they sent Daniel upstairs.

Leader Glisson listened in silence, his expression unreadable.

"Exactly what I would expect from him," he said at last.

Brenda lowered her head, shamefully picking at the skin around her fingers. She wasn't hearing every word, but she didn't need to. Everything was already out in the open.

"Hold your head up. None of this is your fault. You're not the one who should be ashamed," Glisson said, turning to her. His voice was as sincere as it had been when he'd scolded Daniel earlier.

Slowly, Brenda lifted her flushed face. Not wanting to embarrass her further, Glisson quickly averted his gaze and turned back to Daniel.

"So, brave knight, did your stupid plan work?" he asked with a forced smirk.

"No," Daniel muttered, barely audible.

Brenda's head fell again, but this time not out of shame—out of helplessness. Maybe her only chance at salvation had slipped right through her fingers. Silent tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I… I need to wash my face," she said in a choked voice, needing to escape somewhere she could cry in peace.

Glisson nodded. “There’s a sink in the back you can use,” he said, gesturing toward the door.

Daniel watched as she stood up. When he saw the tears sliding down her face, something inside him shattered. A spark flickered deep in his mind.

Sink… bathroom… Lady Valtorin… videotape…

The words linked together, forming a chain. The hazy memories from before he woke up were finally coming together. His eyes lit up.

“He recorded his mother,” he blurted out.

Everyone, including Brenda, turned to him in shock. The air in the room grew heavier.

“Among my belongings at home…” Daniel said, his voice dull and detached. His missing memories had begun to return, piece by piece. He had pieced everything together—from the moment he woke up in the ruined house to his arrival on the island.

“It’s at Lady Stewart’s house,” he added.

Glisson snapped his fingers. “Timothy, can you go get it?” he asked Cooper.

“Of course,” Cooper replied, heading for the door—but stopped when Daniel spoke again.

“I’ll go. I want to see him,” His voice was clear and determined.

Olivia interjected, her voice filled with curiosity. “Who is Lady Stewart?” She glanced between Daniel and Leader Glisson.

Before anyone else could answer, Brenda spoke. “Sylvester’s mother.”

First, the man she loved had believed himself to be Sylvester. Then, he had spent days living with that man’s mother. And now, he wanted to go see her again—the mother of the man who had tortured her.

It was too much. The final straw.

“Do you want to become him again?” she suddenly shouted, her voice raw with emotion. She swayed slightly before dropping onto the chair across from Olivia.

Daniel immediately stood and moved in front of her, calmly kneeling at her feet. He took her trembling hands in his own, looking into the girl’s honey-colored eyes.

“I will never be Sylvester, Brenda. Not ever. I will always be the Daniel you know.” His voice was steady, filled with sincerity, touching everyone in the room. “That woman isn’t Sylvester’s mother—she’s Hugo’s.”

Brenda listened, her breath hitching. She was reminded of how much she missed her own parents, of the pain of losing a part of one’s family.

“She’s done nothing wrong,” Daniel continued. “She’s spent years

apart from her child, longing for him. She doesn't even know what he's become, what he looks like now. She had no hand in turning Sylvester into a monster."

Brenda took a deep breath. "Alright," she said, her voice slightly shaky. She pulled one hand free from Daniel's grasp and gently brushed aside a stray lock of his hair.

"But we're going together."

***

Daniel and Brenda arrived in front of Lady Stewart's house, inhaling the misty, cold air of Nivorum's gloomy atmosphere.

Brenda glanced at the familiar building, recalling their guided tour with Leader Glisson. "Is this the house?" she asked.

Daniel nodded silently. His excitement was evident—his heartbeat quickened with anticipation. He calmly knocked on the door—the same door he had installed with his own hands just days ago.

After a brief wait, the door creaked open. Lady Stewart's face shifted from surprise to warmth as a smile spread across her lips. "Hugo, sweetheart."

Daniel returned her smile just as sincerely. "Lady Stewart, may we come in?"

The old woman's expression faltered slightly, as though she hadn't expected him to address her that way. "Of course, this is your home," she said, stepping aside to let them in.

The moment Daniel stepped inside, a familiar warmth enveloped him—the warmth of a home he had longed for. He knew she wasn't his mother. He even knew whose mother she truly was. And yet, he couldn't resist the comfort that washed over him. Without hesitation, he settled into the blue armchair.

"Lady Stewart," he began.

"You can call me Helena," she interrupted with a gentle smile. Then, before he could continue, she added, "I was so sure you were Hugo."

Brenda let out a quiet sigh of discomfort but quickly composed herself under Daniel's warning gaze.

"I'm sorry," Daniel said softly. Then, after a brief pause, "Please, will you sit beside me, Mother?"

The woman's smile returned, though now tinged with emotion. She took a seat beside him on the couch, searching his face. "Your eyes…" she murmured, slightly puzzled.

"The lenses didn't suit me," Daniel said with a faint smile, taking her hand in his. "I'm not Hugo, and I don't even know who he is," he admitted, his gaze locking onto hers. "But if you'd accept a son named

Daniel…”

Lady Stewart’s eyes welled up. A few tears slipped down her cheeks, landing on their joined hands. Whatever words she wanted to say caught in her throat, unable to come out. Overcome with emotion, she pulled Daniel into a tight embrace.

Brenda watched the events unfold in silence, reading every thought in the woman’s mind. The past bled from the woman’s mind into her own: the injustices, the separations, the years of loss. Sylvester’s history poured from his mother’s memories into Brenda’s consciousness, a storm of grief and longing crashing over her.

As Daniel and Lady Stewart finally pulled apart, the woman turned to Brenda with a soft smile. “Is she your girlfriend?” she asked, wiping away her tears. Her gaze remained on Brenda, who instantly turned bright red.

Daniel hesitated.

This woman, who had longed for her son for years, would never get the chance to meet Sylvester’s real girlfriend. At the same time, a distant memory of his own mother surfaced—her hopeful wish that one day he would introduce someone to her. The memory felt as vivid as if it had happened just yesterday.

With a small smile, Daniel answered, “Yes. My girlfriend.”

The words slipped from his lips almost instinctively, born from the longing for a moment neither Lady Stewart nor his own mother had ever been able to experience.

Brenda’s heart pounded so hard it felt like it might burst from her chest. For the first time in her life, someone had called her their girlfriend. Her face burned—redder than a tomato, hotter than an erupting volcano.

***

After their short visit, Daniel stepped out into the narrow street with Brenda, carrying his belongings—and, more importantly, the videotape he had stolen from Sylvester’s room. As they walked toward the manhole cover, neither of them was sure what to say.

Without hesitation, Brenda slipped into Daniel’s mind. What she found was nothing but a jumble of unrelated fragments—his motorcycle’s speedometer, the final boss’s weapon from the last video game he played, Hibernian’s Scottish League championship win from last year, and the breakfast plates Lady Stewart had prepared.

A warm laugh escaped her lips. “You’re terrible, Daniel.”

He had expected her to try reading his mind after their conversation inside, so he had deliberately focused on random thoughts to throw her off.

“Fair enough,” he said, meeting her gaze.

She hesitated for a moment before speaking, her voice timid. “Can I ask you for something?”

“Of course,” he replied, curious.

“Can I hold your hand? At least until few minutes,” she asked, barely above a whisper.

Daniel didn’t answer. He just kept walking. Then, after a moment, he reached out and took her hand. Slowly, their fingers intertwined.

CHAPTER XI

LETTER

Daniel, Brenda, Olivia, Leader Glisson, and Heir Cooper stood around the table in the office beneath Fast Cups, staring at the videotape—crushed and cracked from the impact of a hundred-and-ten-story fall.

Will this be of any use?" Olivia asked, looking seriously at Glisson. This tape was their only hope of incriminating Sylvester. And now, Daniel was in danger as well.

Glisson let out a deep sigh as he studied the tape. "Actually, it will," he said gruffly. "Secretly recording Supreme Leader Vulton Valtorin's wife is an even bigger scandal." His gaze shifted to Brenda. "I'm not saying what happened to you isn't important, Brenda. I'm talking about how much this will shake the higher-ups."

Brenda nodded in understanding, choosing not to interrupt.

"Then what's the problem?" Olivia asked, sensing the hesitation in Glisson's tone.

"Everyone in the administration will have to watch this footage," Glisson said thoughtfully.

"Let them," Daniel said indifferently. "Why should we care?"

Leader Glisson tapped his fingers against the table, closing his eyes, deep in thought.

Brenda slipped effortlessly into his unguarded mind. His thoughts played out like frames of a film before her eyes.

Leader Glisson stood in the garden of a two-story house. Across from him sat Emilia Valtorin. Her hair wasn't white but its natural red. The image dissolved like a cloud of dust, replaced by a church scene. Lady Valtorin now wore a wedding dress—voluminous, elegant, glowing with a soft light.

"Emilia Glisson," Brenda muttered, her eyes widening.

On their first day in Nivorum, when she had entered Lady Valtorin's mind from the balcony, she had sensed that her last name was Glisson. She had even told Daniel about it. But when the woman was publicly announced as Valtorin, she had dismissed it as a mistake and forgotten about it.

"Was she your wife?" Brenda asked, disbelief tinging her voice.

The entire room turned toward Leader Glisson at once. Heir Cooper, his expression pained, stepped away from the table and sank onto the couch at the back.

Glisson clenched his jaw. “How do you know that?” His voice was controlled, but the revelation had hit hard. The question came out harsher than he intended.

A cold fear settled inside Brenda. For the first time since Sylvester had been punished and removed from duty, her face turned pale with fear.

“You’re scaring her,” Olivia said, her tone just as firm.

Seeing Brenda’s anxious gaze, Glisson pulled himself together. He exhaled slowly and spoke again, this time in a calmer voice. “Very few people know this. Where did you learn it?”

Brenda hesitated, debating whether to reveal her ability. Her eyes flicked to Daniel, searching for his opinion.

Daniel recognized the conflict in her expression and gave her a reassuring nod.

“You were just thinking about your marriage to Lady Valtorin,” Brenda said, her voice slightly cracking.

Glisson’s expression mirrored Olivia’s stunned silence. “Yes, I was,” he admitted, his gaze locked on Brenda.

“I can read minds,” she added suddenly, as if stating something completely ordinary.

Her words hung in the air.

Leader Glisson looked just as shocked as when he had first seen Daniel wield a gun. “You can what?” His brows knit together in astonishment.

“This is what Halley gave me,” Brenda said, sadness darkening her features. The look on her face made it painfully clear how much she wished none of this had ever happened—how much she wished she had never caught Sylvester’s attention in the first place.

She saw the question forming in Glisson’s mind and answered it before he could ask. “No one knows. I’ve kept it hidden from the very beginning.”

A wave of discomfort washed over Olivia. She turned silently to Brenda. The thought that the girl she had been talking to, sharing secrets with, could have been slipping in and out of her mind all this time—without ever mentioning it—made her feel deceived.

Glisson leaned back in his creaking old armchair, trying to process what he had just heard. He grabbed the transparent tablet resting at the edge of the table and powered it on. The glowing screen illuminated his face as he searched for Brenda’s records. His eyes locked onto the red exclamation mark inside a triangle in the corner of the page.

He stared at it, contemplating its meaning.

Brenda responded instantly. “I’ll be exiled to the outside world because I’m useless here,” she said calmly. That was exactly what

Glisson had been thinking. “They believe I’m worthless in Nivorum because I hid my ability.”

Her words left Daniel and Olivia in stunned silence. Both froze.

Meanwhile, Heir Cooper, who had never seen an ability like this in Nivorum before, observed in quiet fascination from the couch at the back of the room.

After a brief pause, Leader Glisson finally spoke. “You did the right thing,” he said in a calm voice. “If you hadn’t kept it a secret, they would have done everything in their power to turn you into one of them. Your ability is incredibly rare and valuable, Brenda.”

A hidden detail in Glisson’s words piqued Olivia’s curiosity. “What do you mean by ‘turning her into one of them’?” she asked, furrowing her brows.

“The effects of Halley are still not fully understood in Nivorum,” Glisson explained, addressing the interns’ growing curiosity. “They know that your fears can be triggered and converted into usable abilities, but that’s about it.” He paused before adding, “Daniel’s ability to wield a gun this early, Brenda’s mind reading… These are unexpected developments. There’s no reason they wouldn’t turn you into lab rats to study them.”

Daniel’s eyes darkened. “But you know people who have figured out the origins of these effects, don’t you?” he asked, hinting at their encounter with Hunt earlier that morning.

“The Academy has far more knowledge than we do here,” Glisson admitted, nodding.

Olivia, recalling the events of the morning, spoke in a questioning tone. “This morning, when you took Daniel, you restricted his mind. You have academic abilities too.”

Daniel tensed. “You restricted my mind?” His expression hardened with unease.

Brenda, sensing he was about to press the issue, leaned in and whispered, “That’s not the point, Daniel.”

Glisson turned back to Olivia. “A few of us can use very limited academic abilities. It’s just a drop in the ocean.” Then, with a tone tinged with admiration, he added, “The Academy offers real training. They’ve fully unraveled Halley’s effects and the power of light. Here, we do nothing more than trigger your primal instincts, like training attack dogs.”

Olivia’s gaze sharpened. “If you know they’re turning people into monsters, why are you part of it?” she asked, her voice laced with disdain. She was the one who hated the training the most.

Glisson straightened in his chair. The discomfort he felt about his role was written all over his face. “It’s the only way I can stay in Nivorum,” he admitted, then took a deep breath. The words felt heavy

enough to crush him.

"Before I was brought here, I was married to Emilia. We had a small house in Vlosford. I worked as a detective, and she was a doctor. We loved each other. We were happy with our lives.

"One evening, while we were having dinner in our garden, everything was suddenly filled with a bright light. We both collapsed. Hours later, we woke up in unbearable pain. Just like what happened to you all."

Everyone listened in silence, barely daring to breathe. The three interns hung onto his every word, eager to understand why the Glissons had separated.

Glisson leaning forward slightly. His finger traced slowly over the damaged videotape on the table.

"I wasn't even thirty yet. Emilia was twenty-five. She was even more beautiful than she is now," he said, a faint, nostalgic smile touching his lips. "Vulton noticed that beauty. But more importantly, he noticed her ability. Emilia could heal any non-fatal wound or illness with just a touch. A skill just as rare as yours," he added, glancing at Brenda.

He paused briefly before continuing.

"It was impossible for him not to want such a valuable ability by his side. He couldn't defy Nivorum's laws, but he bent them. He invalidated marriages from the outside world and banished his own wife, Lady Stewart, from the main building—clearing his path. He worked on this for five years. And in the end, Emilia Glisson became Lady Valtorin."

Brenda hesitated before asking, her voice careful, filled with quiet understanding. "Did he force her?"

Sylvester had forced himself on her for months. This made it all too easy for her to empathize with Lady Valtorin's situation.

"No," Glisson said, his voice breaking slightly. He struggled to maintain control over his emotions. "Emilia chose to become Lady Valtorin."

Silence settled over the office once again. The look in Glisson's eyes made it painfully clear—he still loved her. Even after all these years, even knowing she was married to another man, the thought of others watching a video of her—especially one like this—was unbearable to him.

Brenda took a deep breath and gathered her courage. In the softest, most innocent voice, she spoke.

"If we don't use this tape against Sylvester, then I'll never be able to be with the person I love."

Glisson lowered his head. He recognized the selfishness in himself… and the fact that Brenda's freedom depended on this

videotape.

After a long silence, he reluctantly said, “Fine. I’ll give this videotape to Vulton.”

***

After the girls returned to the main building, Daniel and Leader Glisson were left alone in the hidden office beneath Fast Cups.

With Daniel having been missing for nearly twenty days, it had been decided that he couldn’t just return to his floor as if nothing had happened. For now, he would stay here.

Glisson remained seated at his desk, still staring at the tape in his hand. Anyone could see his mind was lost in old memories—there was no need for Brenda’s abilities to tell that.

Daniel, on the other hand, was struggling to process everything. Brenda’s desperation, the beating he had taken from Sylvester, Leader Holloway’s IVs, Leader Glisson’s help, Lady Stewart’s overwhelming kindness, and his brief hand-in-hand walk with Brenda… It had all happened so fast that he didn’t even know how to feel about any of it.

And then, without thinking, a question slipped from his lips.

“Do you think I could ever become an heir, Leader Glisson?” he asked, sitting up on the couch.

Glisson, caught off guard, finally tore his gaze away from the tape and focused on him. “I hope you won’t. Why do you ask?” he said with mild suspicion.

“Just curious,” Daniel replied, his expression unreadable.

Glisson stood and walked over to the couch where Daniel sat, his eyes sharp and probing. “Is there something I don’t know?”

Daniel hesitated only for a moment before speaking. “Leader Holloway—”

Glisson cut him off before he could finish. “Did he want you as his heir?” His eyes locked onto Daniel’s face. Then, pulling up a wooden chair, he sat directly across from him.

Daniel nodded. “He implied it.”

“He must have sensed that you were more than you appeared. That doesn’t surprise me,” Glisson said thoughtfully. “Malcolm always surrounds himself with the strongest. He knows you could become an even greater monster than Sylvester.”

“I will never be Sylvester,” Daniel snapped, his voice sharp with anger. This comparison alone was enough to disgust him. He swallowed hard before admitting, “Leader Holloway gave me IVs twice to make me stronger.”

Glisson’s gaze hardened. When he spoke, his voice was firm and unwavering.

“I want you to think, Daniel. Will you become Nivorum’s rabid dog, or…” He paused, his words deliberate. “There are people out there who need your help. You could be their hero. Remember, you are the hero of this story.”

Without waiting for an answer, Glisson rose from his chair and silently left the office.

***

The next morning, all of Nivorum woke up to the first Monday of October.

For Daniel, however, it marked the beginning of a new captivity. He wasn’t even allowed to step into the public-facing area of Fast Cups.

Back in Lingerwood, he had never been particularly fond of going outside. But now, he felt like a trapped rat. From the very first day, the cold walls of Leader Glisson’s office were already closing in on him.

For a while, he thought about his friends, likely enduring another torturous training session. Absurd ideas flickered through his mind—imagining them being buried in the ground or shot with a gun. He shook his head to clear the intrusive thoughts and rubbed his eyes.

Slowly, he rose from the couch and glanced around, searching for something to occupy himself with. Hundreds of books lined the walls, staring back at him, but he didn’t bother to read a single title. As he wandered through the room, he mumbled, “Brenda’s dream.” A small smile tugged at his lips.

The moment passed, and his gaze drifted toward Leader Glisson’s desk.

He settled into the worn-out armchair, wincing as its grating sound scraped against his ears. Among all the historical artifacts cluttering the desk, only one thing caught his attention—an antique typewriter.

Gently, he pulled it toward him and looked around for something to write on. But when he found no paper on the desk, he opened the top drawer.

Inside the disorganized mess, a handwritten letter caught his eye. It was partially sticking out of an envelope.

For a moment, he closed his eyes, questioning the ethics of what he was about to do.

But curiosity won.

Slowly, he pulled the paper out and placed it on the desk.

Carefully, he began to read.

Lando Glisson,

I hope this letter reaches you. We need your help. Those whose abilities haven't faded have started forming gangs. Their numbers are greater than ever. Every day, they demand more resources… and sometimes, even people. We are under constant threat. If we don't find a permanent solution soon, we won't be able to hold out in this cave much longer.

We need people—people who will stay and use their abilities to protect us.

This community was built with you. It works for you. And now, it needs you.

Serena Watson

Daniel read the note several more times, trying to absorb its meaning. Leader Glisson had warned them countless times about the harshness of the outside world, but this was something more. He didn't understand why Glisson had created a community out there. The fact that this truth had been kept from him—just when he had finally decided to trust Glisson—left Daniel feeling disappointed.

Curiosity got the better of him. He began rummaging through the drawers, searching for more information. He wanted to know what else Leader Glisson was hiding. The sounds of drawers opening and closing filled the office, and the rustling of papers scratched at his ears. Old belongings, artifacts from history, and objects that seemed to hold long-forgotten memories emerged, all covered in dust.

Then, a sudden cracking sound came from the wall.

Daniel froze.

He knew exactly what he needed to do—shove the letter back into the open drawer and step away from the desk immediately. But this time, his body refused to move.

The stone wall slid aside, revealing a hidden passage. Glisson stepped inside.

Daniel remained frozen at the desk, caught red-handed. Their eyes met. Glisson immediately noticed the note from Serena Watson lying on the table.

"Were you looking for something, Daniel?" Glisson asked, his gaze never leaving him.

Daniel swallowed hard, heat rising to his face. Just moments ago, he had been angry at Leader Glisson. But now, the embarrassment of being caught tightened around him like a vice.

"No, Leader Glisson, I was just—"

"Just what?" Glisson interrupted with an easy smile, acting as if it didn't matter. Slowly, he stepped further into the room, moving toward the desk.

His calm reaction only made Daniel feel more ashamed. His face

burned. He moved to stand from the chair, but Glisson raised a hand, gesturing for him to stay seated. Then, he took a seat in one of the chairs on the other side of the desk.

Pointing to the note on the table, he finally spoke. “Things are getting much worse out there.”

Daniel wanted to ask about the community outside and why it had been kept from them. But after being caught red-handed, he was too ashamed to find the courage to speak.

“Serena has been out there for nine years,” Glisson continued. “She arrived during the last Halley passage. She was on the same floor as Cooper. Smart, sharp, strong girl. But her fears weren’t strong enough. Nivorum deemed her unfit and sent her outside.”

“Like they’re going to do to Brenda,” Daniel muttered under his breath.

Then, his eyes narrowed. Something about Serena’s story didn’t add up. He knew a little about Halley’s Comet.

“Wait… I don’t understand. Doesn’t Halley only pass every 76 years? How could she have—” His sentence trailed off. The pieces weren’t fitting together.

Glisson noticed the confusion on Daniel’s face and smirked slightly. Watching the intern try to work out the calculations in his head amused him.

Reaching out, Glisson gently spun the miniature globe sitting on the desk. “Time doesn’t move as fast here as you think,” he said calmly. “Open the bottom drawer.”

Now with permission, Daniel turned back to the drawers he had been rifling through just moments ago. He pulled open the lowest one. A thick layer of dust rose into the air, carrying a musty scent that made him recoil. He blinked rapidly and shielded his face with his hand.

“Take the most worn-out one.”

Daniel reached for the drawer, pulling his head back to avoid the rising cloud of dust. He pulled out a yellowed sheet of paper and placed it on the desk. It contained information about Lando Glisson—his name, surname, birthplace, date of birth, hair color, height, and weight.

His eyes locked onto one particular detail.

“1881,” he whispered in shock.

“I’m a little older than you expected,” Glisson said, a faint smirk on his lips. “Time moves much slower here. Do you know how long it’s been since you arrived?”

“Almost two months,” Daniel replied carefully, pulling his creaky chair slightly forward, curious to see where Glisson was going with this.

Glisson spun the small globe on the desk once more. As its luminous details slowly shifted, he spoke.

"A little over a year has passed at your old home, Daniel."

Daniel's lips parted, but no words came out. Thousands of thoughts raced through his mind, but he couldn't fully grasp any of them. He had no idea what to think, what to say, or what to do.

His mind drifted to George, his old housemate, with whom he had once stayed up talking until morning. He must have graduated by now, he thought. He wondered what his father had done during all this time without hearing from him. But then, almost immediately, he decided he didn't care.

His thoughts took another turn. Emily's green eyes surfaced in his mind—his ex-girlfriend, who had left him just as he was preparing to propose. For a moment, he recalled the image of her kissing someone else. A deep disgust twisted his face. She's probably still with him, he thought mockingly.

Emily's fading green eyes were replaced by a pair of honey-colored ones, accompanied by a shy smile.

"Daniel, focus," Leader Glisson said, his patience running thin. It was probably the eighth or tenth time he had called Daniel's name, trying to pull him out of his daze.

Daniel finally snapped out of it, locking eyes with Glisson.

"Ever since this started, I can't tell what I'm supposed to be most shocked by," he admitted in a blank voice.

"You'll learn not to be shocked," Glisson said with a small smile.

"Maybe," Daniel muttered. Then, after a pause, he asked in awe, "Are we time travelers here?"

Leader Glisson smirked slightly.

"In a way," he replied. "I came here in 1910. That was a little over twenty years ago."

Daniel's expression shifted. "You were really born in 1881?"

"Yes, but I'm still not fifty yet. I'm not that old," Glisson said with a teasing smile before his expression grew serious again. "Don't dwell on this for now. We have more pressing matters."

"Like the exiles?"

"Like the exiles," Glisson confirmed with a nod. "And like Sylvester. He returns to duty in a week. Whatever we're going to do, we have to do it before then."

"Do we have a plan?" Daniel asked.

"For Sylvester, we have no choice but to hand the tape over to Vulton Valtorin," Glisson said. Then, with a more careful tone, he added, "But as for those outside… there is something we can do."

"Like what?" Daniel leaned forward, intrigued.

Glisson exhaled heavily, his tone weighed down.

“Brenda will be expelled from the city in a few months,” he said.

The words hit Daniel like a slap. He had already heard it from Brenda herself, but hearing it directly from a Nivorum Leader made it all the more unbearable.

“She won’t survive out there. You can’t do this,” he said, his voice trembling with desperation.

“This isn’t my decision, Daniel. It’s not something we can stop,” Glisson said calmly.

“Then what are we going to do?” Daniel asked helplessly.

Glisson carefully chose his next words. He didn’t want Daniel to panic.

“Brenda’s hidden ability is incredibly valuable. We can prepare her for the outside world. She could help both herself and the exiles.”

Daniel was still fixated on the idea of Brenda being sent outside. He couldn’t accept it.

“Is there no way to keep her here?” he asked.

“The only person who could keep her here is the one in charge of her training—Sylvester,” Leader Glisson said, his voice turning sharper and more serious. “And Sylvester is trying to do exactly that. So tell me, which is better? Being in Sylvester’s hands or being out there?”

Brenda answered with sharp determination, “Being out there.”

During Sylvester’s suspension, her training had been entrusted to Lando Glisson. He had given her the symbol that Daniel had previously used in secret. A few hours later, she came to the office. Glisson explained the situation, and she gave this answer to her leader.

Daniel wasn’t happy with the decision, but he knew Brenda’s choice mattered more. He only let out a grumpy mutter.

“Anywhere without Sylvester is better,” she added.

Daniel abruptly joined the conversation. “Then I’m going too.”

He was certain that timid Brenda wouldn’t be able to adapt to the outside world. At the very least, he wanted to be there to protect her.

Brenda looked at him and smiled.

Leader Glisson responded with calmness. “Sorry, knight. You don’t have a ticket out of here. They won’t let you leave. You know that.”

Daniel’s protective gaze hardened. “I can’t let her go out there alone,” he snapped.

“But you can leave her to Sylvester, can’t you?”

The air in the room turned ice-cold.

Daniel’s protective stance shifted into sudden discomfort. Brenda’s smile faded instantly.

Glisson knew how unsettling his words were, and he didn’t enjoy saying them. But he also knew Daniel needed to hear the harsh truth to fully grasp the situation.

“Leader Glisson is right,” Brenda said firmly, turning to Daniel. Her voice didn’t waver. “If this is the only way to be free of him, then I want to go.”

“And by doing so, you’ll be saving yourself and the exiles,” Glisson added, trying to encourage her. “But we need to train you thoroughly.”

Daniel was still not fully convinced. “What about the tape? Won’t it be enough to get Sylvester punished? Then Brenda wouldn’t have to leave.”

“Whether Sylvester is punished or not, it won’t change Brenda’s situation, Daniel,” Glisson said, his patience wearing thin. He had just convinced Brenda to help the exiles, and Daniel’s insistence on questioning that decision was starting to grate on his nerves.

“If Sylvester is punished, she can reveal her abilities and stay here,” Daniel argued once more.

Glisson’s expression hardened. He tried to keep his voice steady, but this time, it rose slightly.

“And then they’ll turn her into a lab rat like Kevin!” he snapped. “I still don’t even know what extra potential they saw in him when he got here. If they need to, they won’t hesitate to crack open her brain and examine it, Daniel. Stop acting like a child and face reality.”

Brenda turned to Daniel with a look of sadness, yet warmth remained in her gaze. Despite all she had endured, determination shone in her eyes.

“More than anything, I would have loved to walk this path with you, Daniel,” she said, her voice quiet but bittersweet. “But sometimes, we have to accept our fate.”

CHAPTER XII

HEIR

As Lando entered the office through the secret door, he said, “Get ready.” He tossed the formal Nivorum attire onto the edge of the couch where Daniel was sleeping.

“What’s this? What’s going on?” Daniel asked, his eyes still struggling to fully open.

“Change your clothes. We’re going up.”

“Why?” He quickly got up from the couch. “Is Brenda okay?”

After lying still for so long, the sudden movement made his vision go dark for a brief moment. In recent days, Leader Glisson hadn’t come to the office at all, only sending occasional updates through Oscar.

“Everyone’s fine,” Glisson said, placing a few files into his briefcase. “But in a few hours, we’ll find out if we still are.”

Even as he got dressed, Daniel kept watching him, waiting for a clearer answer.

“The Leaders’ Council is convening soon,” Glisson said. “A decision will be made regarding Sylvester’s actions.” He paused briefly before adding, “And regarding you as well.”

“Me?” Daniel froze mid-motion, one sleeve of his sweater hanging loose.

“Nothing to worry about,” Glisson said indifferently. “You’re being charged with trespassing in the Supreme Leader’s home and escaping from the main building. But since they have no evidence, you’ll be found innocent.”

Then, he nodded toward Daniel’s sweater. “I don’t think that suits you. It’ll look better if you wear it properly.”

Glisson’s casual demeanor helped ease some of Daniel’s tension. Taking a deep breath, he finished putting on his sweater properly.

“I’ve arranged everything. Just trust me,” Leader Glisson said.

“I trust you, Leader Glisson,” Daniel replied.

Glisson gave a faint smile, pulled a folded piece of paper from his briefcase, and handed it to him.

“I’ll be right back. Memorize everything written here.”

***

As Daniel stepped out of Fast Cups, the sharp, icy wind of Nivorum

Square hit his face. The familiar sting, after days of confinement, sent waves of relief through his body. A faint smile formed on his lips.

"I missed this," he said to Leader Glisson, who was walking beside him.

"Enjoy it later. Don't forget what you memorized," Glisson warned, his expression serious.

Daniel nodded in acknowledgment as they continued toward the entrance of the main building. Around them, everyone walking through the square had their hands shielding their faces, heads lowered in an attempt to protect themselves from the cold. Daniel, on the other hand, smiled widely, letting the wind bite at his skin.

As they stepped inside, Daniel immediately felt the weight of curious eyes on him. Nearly everyone they passed stole a glance in his direction.

"The whole city was looking for you. You're a bit of a celebrity right now," Glisson remarked as they entered the elevator.

Daniel followed him inside without hesitation.

As the elevator ascended, his heart pounded in his throat. He had no idea what was about to happen. This wasn't just about Sylvester being punished—he knew his own situation was far more serious. The realization sent a sickening twist through his stomach. The thought of being accused of trespassing in the Supreme Leader's home made his knees tremble slightly.

Still, the only thing keeping him grounded was Leader Glisson's calm, composed presence. As long as he was there, at least it felt like things were still under control.

But all those thoughts vanished the moment the elevator doors slid open.

Standing right in front of him was Olivia.

Dressed in an elegant Nivorum formal attire that left her shoulders bare, she exuded effortless confidence. A smirk tugged at her lips.

"I know, I look stunning," she said playfully, then stepped gracefully into the elevator.

As she moved aside, Daniel's gaze immediately fell on Brenda. He swallowed and, without meaning to, found himself taking in every detail of her appearance.

She wore a form-fitting, plain black dress—simple and unadorned, with no embroidery or embellishments to draw attention. The hemline ended just below her knees, and a leather belt at her waist accentuated her delicate figure. A small bag rested in her hand.

Behind her glasses, her honey-colored eyes gleamed, mirroring the warmth of her smile.

Even Leader Glisson took a moment to admire her. With a faint smirk, he said, "The simplicity of that outfit might irritate the ones

upstairs. But it's very elegant."

"Thank you, Leader Glisson," Brenda replied politely, offering a slight curtsy. With her gentle smile and subtle makeup, she looked as if she had been reborn.

Olivia grabbed Daniel by the sleeve of his jacket and pulled him aside. Keeping her smug grin intact, she teased, "Move over so the girl can actually get in the elevator. You can admire her later."

Brenda simply smiled at Olivia's joke. As she stepped into the elevator, a faint blush dusted her cheeks, adding even more warmth to her expression.

But curiosity soon overtook her. She immediately slipped into Daniel's mind, eager to see what he was thinking.

Yet, his mind felt dense and clouded, as though shrouded in thick fog. It was chaotic and impenetrable—like trying to drive at night with no headlights. She couldn't read a single clear thought.

The only thing she could sense was overwhelming tension.

***

When they reached the ninetieth floor, they found themselves in a somber setting. The elevator opened into a massive circular chamber. Lining the curved walls were dozens of elevator doors, each flanked by soldiers standing at attention in their heavy coats.

The ceiling formed a vast dome, and hanging from its center was a colossal figure of a vulture, swaying slightly.

Seated at the round table were some of the leaders whom Daniel and his friends had occasionally encountered on their way to training or in Nivorum Square. Without exception, every pair of eyes turned toward Daniel the moment he stepped into the room.

They all wanted to see the intern accused of trespassing into Supreme Leader Vulton Valtorin's home and escaping from the main building.

Leader Glisson gave the other leaders a brief bow of his head in greeting. Then, turning to the interns, he instructed, "Take your seats."

He took the chair at the farthest end of the table, gesturing for Daniel to sit beside him, while the girls were directed to the seats directly across from them.

Moments later, Leader Holloway stepped out of an elevator and strode toward the table, his eyes fixed on Daniel.

For nearly a month, he had received no word about his intern, and now that he had reappeared, Holloway was ready for answers. The fact that Daniel's defense was being handled by Leader Glisson only added to his irritation.

His steps were aimed directly at Daniel's chair, but just as he reached him, another elevator door opened, forcing him to pause.

From the gilded doors adorned with vulture engravings, Vulton Valtorin and Emilia Valtorin entered.

The atmosphere in the room shifted instantly.

The presence of the Valtorin couple commanded immediate respect, prompting everyone to straighten in their seats.

Once the Supreme Leader and his wife took their places at the table, Leader Holloway diverted his gaze from Daniel and returned to his own chair, silently seating himself beside them.

Supreme Leader Valtorin's eyes locked onto Daniel at the far end of the table.

"How nice to have our missing intern back," he said, attempting to sound composed, but the curiosity and frustration in his voice were unmistakable.

Leader Glisson raised a hand, requesting permission to speak. When granted, he said, "I will provide the necessary details regarding Intern Daniel Milner's whereabouts at the appropriate time, Supreme Leader Valtorin."

"Perhaps that time is right now, Leader Glisson," Valtorin countered.

Glisson cleared his throat with a light cough. "Intern Daniel Milner was attacked twenty-two days ago," he said.

His words cast a deep silence over the table. The chamber was so still that even the flutter of a butterfly's wings would have sounded deafening.

"We don't know who attacked him or how, but he was thrown out of the main building by his assailant," Glisson continued.

"Is this true?" Supreme Leader Valtorin asked, his tone commanding. His gaze locked onto Daniel.

Daniel hesitated before standing up. "It's completely true, sir. When I woke up, I was in the house of a woman I'd never met," he said, sticking to the exact words Glisson had given him.

One of the leaders furrowed his brows. "So you didn't try to escape? Is that what you're saying?"

"No," Daniel replied firmly.

As soon as he finished speaking, Glisson took over again. "Supreme Leader Valtorin, the person who found Intern Daniel Milner unconscious was Helena Stewart. He received treatment in her home for days. He is not lying."

The name Helena Stewart plunged the already silent chamber into an even heavier stillness.

Now, everyone was holding their breath, waiting to see how Supreme Leader Vulton Valtorin would react.

Valtorin simply nodded. “Very well. Her word can be trusted,” he said. Then, regaining his composure, he continued, “The other accusation is that you entered my home.”

Daniel let out a short but loud laugh—just as it was written on the paper Glisson had given him.

“I sincerely apologize,” he said quickly, regaining control of himself. “I don’t know who made this accusation, but it must be another intern. My symbol only allows me to travel as far as Nivorum Square.”

One of the leaders turned to Daniel. “Show your symbol.”

Without hesitation, Daniel pushed up his sleeve. “With your permission,” he said, looking at Supreme Leader Valtorin.

After receiving a nod of approval, he removed his wristband carrying the symbol and slid it across the table to the leader who had requested it.

The leader examined it under a transparent tablet for a while before announcing, “Untampered and fully functional.” He turned to Supreme Leader Valtorin and confirmed the results.

With the same efficiency, he slid the wristband back toward Daniel.

“We need to ask whether the accuser has any evidence,” Supreme Leader Valtorin stated. “There are already other charges against him. Hugo Valtorin and Kevin Danning may enter.”

Daniel’s eyes widened at Kevin’s name. He quickly glanced at Brenda and Olivia, searching for any hint of an explanation. But both of them remained calm.

“He’s been helping Sylvester,” Glisson muttered, sensing Daniel’s confusion.

The farthest elevator door opened.

Stepping inside was Sylvester, his icy gaze filled with hatred for everyone at the table. Walking beside him was Kevin. The two made their way to the opposite side of the chamber and sat in the two chairs placed at the shorter end of the table.

Sylvester’s eyes locked onto Daniel.

Seeing the intern he had thrown off the 110th floor weeks ago, sitting there completely unharmed, clearly unsettled him. His lips twitched. Just looking at Daniel, knowing he was the reason for all of this, stoked the fire of his rage.

“Heir Hugo Valtorin,” Supreme Leader Vulton Valtorin said sternly. “You have been disregarding Nivorum’s laws far too often lately.”

Hearing his full name spoken in that cold, detached tone made Sylvester uneasy.

“Dad. This is complete nonsense,” he countered.

“Supreme Leader!” Vulton Valtorin thundered.

His voice was so powerful that everyone at the table flinched.

Sylvester straightened in his chair at his father’s furious outburst. “Apologies, Supreme Leader Valtorin,” he corrected himself.

Supreme Leader Valtorin fixed his gaze on Sylvester. “Can you prove that Intern Daniel Milner entered my home?” he asked, his voice still brimming with anger.

Daniel followed Leader Glisson’s instructions to the letter, but Vulton Valtorin’s sharp tone made his chest tighten, as if his heart were beating in his throat.

“I saw him,” Sylvester said. “He was in my room, rummaging through my belongings.”

The leader who had just examined Daniel’s symbol responded calmly, “We checked. He never accessed the 110th floor.”

Sylvester scowled. “Then he must have found a way.”

“That’s impossible,” the leader countered.

A condescending sneer curled on Sylvester’s lips. “Then he’s smarter than you,” he hissed.

“Hugo Valtorin, watch your words!” Supreme Leader Valtorin’s voice thundered through the room. “You will not disrespect the leaders. Not in this hall. Not in my presence!”

“Apologies,” Sylvester muttered weakly. Being humiliated like this in front of Daniel and Brenda only fueled the rage burning inside him.

After nearly an hour of accusations and defenses, Supreme Leader Valtorin said, his voice echoing through the hall, “I declare that Intern Daniel Milner is cleared of all charges.” Then, locking eyes with Daniel, he added, “But I do not want to see you here again.”

“Of course, sir,” Daniel replied, exhaling deeply. After offering a respectful nod, he sank back into his chair.

Relief flooded Daniel’s body as the tension drained from his muscles. But even as he relaxed, he could feel Leader Holloway’s gaze fixed on him—watching him intently from the very start of the meeting.

Supreme Leader Valtorin then turned his attention to his son. He forced his voice into a formal, measured tone, masking the disappointment and anger simmering beneath the surface.

“You are here for secretly recording Lady Emilia Valtorin. Will you defend yourself?”

“I didn’t do it,” Sylvester replied. “There’s no proof that I installed that camera. I do not accept this accusation.”

Once again, Sylvester proved that he was just as well-versed in Nivorum’s laws as Lando Glisson himself.

Leader Glisson responded calmly. “If you’d prefer to take the long route, we can inspect every symbol in Nivorum, one by one. That way,

we can confirm that no one besides you, Lady Valtorin, and Hugo Valtorin has entered the residence."

For a moment, Sylvester saw an opportunity to slip out of the situation. He straightened in his chair, confidence settling into his posture and voice.

"If I was the one who did this, then how did they get the tape? That means someone found a way into our home," he said.

"That's impossible," Supreme Leader Valtorin stated sharply.

Just then, an unexpected voice rose from beside Sylvester.

"If there's suspicion that he entered the room, you could check for fingerprints," Kevin said, breaking the silence.

His words caught everyone's attention. When he looked at the Supreme Leader, there was a glimmer in his eyes—he was waiting for the recognition he believed he deserved.

Fingerprint identification had never been considered in Nivorum before. The suggestion sparked murmurs among the leaders.

"Would that work?" Vulton Valtorin asked, turning to one of the leaders beside him.

The leader thought for a moment. "I believe so, sir. There's a former police officer among the interns. We could use her expertise."

Leader Glisson quickly grasped the gravity of the situation. Fingerprint analysis had only begun to emerge as a method before he arrived in Nivorum. However, in his visits to the outside world, he had seen how widespread and reliable it had become. If this test was conducted, he was certain Daniel's fingerprints would be found in Sylvester's room.

This could mark the beginning of the end for the young intern.

"Very well," Supreme Leader Valtorin declared in an authoritative voice. "Fingerprint checks will be conducted. We will reconvene tomorrow morning. Until then, Intern Daniel Milner, you will remain under guard. As for Hugo Valtorin, since he is Nivorum's Heir, he may stay on his house without being placed under guard until tomorrow."

Terror shot through Daniel's body in an instant. He had come so close to walking away from this unscathed, only to suddenly find himself under guard.

He turned to Leader Glisson, eyes pleading.

Glisson was fully aware of the panic surging through his intern. In truth, he was beginning to feel a similar sense of unease. The situation was spiraling out of his control.

For the first time since the meeting had begun, Holloway stood from his chair and spoke in a firm, confident voice.

"One moment, Supreme Leader."

All eyes turned to him.

"Hugo Valtorin already has a record for attacking an intern. I

request to change my heir."

"This is ridiculous!" Sylvester roared, shooting up from his chair. The demand from Holloway sent his nerves into a frenzy.

"He's also disrespectful," Holloway noted, not even sparing Sylvester a glance.

Supreme Leader Valtorin looked at both his son and Holloway in disbelief.

"Leader Holloway, that is not possible. He is also a Supreme Leader candidate."

"I do not want him as my heir. That is my right."

"There is no other heir without a leader. Every Leader must have an heir," Valtorin countered, attempting to reason with Holloway.

Of all the Leaders in Nivorum, Malcolm Holloway was the one he trusted most. He had hoped his son would grow under Holloway's guidance and eventually prepare to lead the city.

Then Holloway spoke again.

"Intern Daniel Milner is ready. I take him as my heir."

The entire floor fell into a deathly silence once more. No one spoke. Gazes flickered between Holloway and Supreme Leader Valtorin.

Brenda, sensing something sinister, focused on Sylvester's mind.

A chilling desire loomed in his thoughts—dark, unrelenting.

"Someone is going to die," she whispered, her skin crawling.

Sylvester opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, his father raised a hand, signaling him to stop.

The gesture silenced Sylvester, but the fury on his face did not fade.

"You can't make a newly arrived intern an heir, Malcolm," Supreme Leader Valtorin said, dropping the formalities in his speech. He was trying to dissuade Holloway in a more personal manner. "Look at the clothes he's wearing. He hasn't even adapted to this place yet." He cast a glance at Daniel.

"He successfully summoned a weapon on a voluntary mission and killed one of our enemies," Holloway replied. Then he turned to Glisson. "Leader Glisson saw it as well."

Valtorin's sharp gaze fixed on Glisson. "Is that true, Leader Glisson?"

Glisson nodded. "It's true." He understood Holloway's intention and plan. He also realized that this was the only way to protect Daniel right now.

Supreme Leader Valtorin's attention returned to Daniel. "Take off your symbol."

Daniel struggled to keep up with the speed of events. The tension and pressure weighed heavier on him as he tried to predict what

would happen next. He hesitated before removing the symbol, which he had only just put back on his wrist, and placed it on the table.

The Supreme Leader extended a hand toward him. A beam of green light shot from his palm, forming a glowing hand that drifted toward the symbol. It grasped it and retracted.

"Let's see if this is right," Valtorin murmured, pressing the wristband between both hands. He closed his eyes as a golden glow emanated from the symbol, bathing his fingers in light. Taking a deep breath, he opened them again.

"Do you vouch for him, Leader Holloway?"

"I do, Supreme Leader Valtorin. I vouch for him."

Valtorin nodded. Rubbing the symbol between his fingers, he let the green hand reappear, sending it back to Daniel.

"You may take your symbol, Heir Daniel Milner."

Daniel swallowed hard, nodding in gratitude, still caught between astonishment and unease. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do. Everything happening right now was far beyond the scenario Leader Glisson had given him.

When he met Sylvester's gaze, he saw nothing but seething hatred in his eyes.

"Thank you, Supreme Leader Valtorin," he managed to say.

Sylvester's voice cut through the air, venomous.

"Once the fingerprints in my room come up, this pathetic little act of yours will be over."

"If he is cleared of the accusations, I will personally take over Sylvester's training," Vulton Valtorin declared. "That way, Holloway can continue to focus on his own intern."

Brenda looked at Sylvester. That ugly grin, a stark contrast to the fury in his eyes. Deep in her mind, she felt the looming certainty—she would be forced to be with him. Nothing about this situation would change.

She lowered her gaze, staring at the floor—until another thought struck her.

Lady Valtorin, the other victim of the day, had not bowed her head even once since stepping into this room. She had shown no shame over Sylvester's behavior. From the very beginning, she had held herself strong.

Brenda reminded herself that she had no reason to feel ashamed for someone else's crimes.

Taking a deep breath, she stood. Pointing directly at Sylvester, she spoke.

"Sylvester forced me into sexual intercourse. Repeatedly."

A heavy silence fell over the room.

Sylvester's pale blue eyes widened in shock. He had always been so

certain that Brenda would never dare bring this up. That this timid girl would accuse him in front of everyone—this was something he had expected even less than Daniel being declared an heir.

"Can you prove it?" asked a dark-skinned woman Leader with braided hair, her tone cool and composed.

For the first time, fury flashed in Brenda's honey-colored eyes.

"He recorded it," she said.

"In his room. Under his bed," Daniel added.

Sylvester sprang to his feet, his voice rising in fury and panic. "Lies! They're lying!" he shouted.

Supreme Leader Valtorin rubbed his temples. "Sit down," he ordered sharply, turning to Sylvester. The constant stream of accusations against his son sent a deep ache through his head. He was struggling to keep his temper in check.

"We will continue tomorrow evening," he announced, exhaustion evident in his voice. "Hugo Valtorin will remain under guard, as he is no longer an heir. Heir Daniel Milner, do not leave the main building until then."

"Dad, no!" Sylvester shouted again, his voice thick with rage and desperation. But the uniformed guards had already seized him by the arms, dragging him toward the elevator.

"There's nothing in my room! I swear!"

"Leader Holloway, come with me," said Vulton Valtorin.

Holloway nodded, casting a brief glance at Daniel—a silent message. He wanted to speak with his former intern, now his heir.

The Valtorin couple stepped swiftly into the ornate elevator doors, followed by Malcolm. The other Leaders gathered their documents and glowing tablets before beginning to leave the floor.

Brenda had been staring at the elevator where Sylvester had been taken for some time.

Breaking the silence, she spoke in a low voice.

"The videotape isn't in his room. He moved it."

"Did you see where?" Daniel asked, his gaze locked onto hers, filled with worry and curiosity.

Brenda shook her head hopelessly.

"No," she said.

***

As Daniel returned to the thirteenth floor with the girls, a fractured sense of belonging stirred within him. After weeks away, he was finally back—but now, as Nivorum's Heir, everything looked different. Despite the fact that his two friends had once hidden in garbage containers to escape from this place and had endured some of their

worst moments here since arriving in the city, he couldn't shake the feeling that he belonged.

"Don't be ridiculous," Brenda nudged him from behind. "You don't belong here."

Olivia glanced between them, trying to understand what was going on. When she caught the knowing look on Brenda's face, realization dawned. "You're not going to let this whole heir thing get to your head, are you?" she asked.

Brenda adjusted her glasses and studied Daniel carefully. "He already has," she sighed, then added in a sharper tone, "Are you going to work for Sylvester? He's going to be the next ruler of the city. They won't give up on him."

"I won't give up on you either," Daniel said. The words had barely left his mouth before he realized what he had just said—and immediately panicked. "I mean, we… I won't leave you behind. As an heir, maybe I can stop them from sending you outside the city. You know, I could talk to Vulton Valtorin, maybe take you on as my intern. Change your records and—" He started rambling, throwing out every possible idea to bury his first sentence.

Olivia couldn't hold back her laughter. Her chuckle echoed down the corridor. "Or you two could go for a nice little walk hand in hand and talk it over," she teased with a playful wink.

Brenda's pale face instantly turned red. She shot Olivia a look—both annoyed and struggling to hide a smile. Her whole body felt warm with embarrassment.

"Would finding that videotape help us?" Daniel asked, his cheeks also flushed as he desperately tried to steer the conversation elsewhere.

Once Olivia stifled her laughter, she smiled slightly. "We won't know unless we try. But how do we figure out where he hid it? If you were Sylvester, where would you put it? You did have to act like him for a while, after all."

Daniel grimaced. The thought of thinking like Sylvester made him uncomfortable. "There were a few places that showed up in the tapes. He might have hidden it in one of those," he said hesitantly.

Brenda shook her head. "That's exactly why you don't belong here. It has to be somewhere he's never been—somewhere no one would ever think to look."

"She's right. That's what I would do, too," Olivia agreed.

"How could he hide it somewhere he's never even been?" Daniel asked, looking between them in confusion.

Brenda's honey-colored eyes gleamed behind her glasses. A small, knowing smile played on her lips. "What if someone else has gone to a place he's never been for him?" she said, her tone making it clear she

already had someone in mind.

Olivia's smile widened. "I love how this girl thinks."

Daniel's eyes darted between them, still struggling to catch up.

"Can you open his door?" Brenda asked, looking directly at Olivia.

Olivia stared into Brenda's eyes for a moment without saying a word. Then, with a questioning tilt of her head, she smirked. "I thought you'd just read my mind and get the answer," she teased before starting down the corridor. "Consider the door open."

"I told you, I only did that once," Brenda called after her, following close behind.

Still not entirely sure what was going on, Daniel trailed after them.

By the time he caught up, Olivia had already reached Kevin's door and was fiddling with the lock. Daniel stopped in surprise. "Kevin?" he asked, bewildered.

A sharp click came from the door. Olivia turned to him with a smirk. "We're about to find out."

***

The three friends tore through Kevin's place, searching every corner. Pens, papers, and paints spilled out everywhere—Kevin had enough supplies to stock an entire stationery store. They checked the drawers, under the couches, inside the cabinets—even Brenda, relying on her old instincts as a journalist, lifted the toilet tank lid just in case. But there was no sign of the videotape anywhere.

"We blew it," Brenda sighed, sitting down at the edge of the bed. "I was wrong. I'm sorry."

Olivia flopped onto the bed with a defeated groan. "At least we tried." But as soon as her head hit the pillow, she paused, frowning. "This pillow is hard as a rock," she muttered.

Brenda adjusted her glasses and gave the pillow a meaningful look. "Or maybe it's what's inside the pillow that's hard," she said, pointing at it.

Without hesitation, Olivia grabbed the pillow's fabric with both hands. The moment she felt the stiffness inside, her excitement spiked. In one swift motion, she tore open the seams, sending tufts of cotton and feathers spilling across the bed. Amidst the white fluff, a black rectangular object emerged. She picked it up, turning it over in her hands.

"That's the videotape," Daniel said, his voice brimming with excitement.

Grinning, Olivia threw her arms around Brenda. "You were right," she said, beaming. Then she handed the tape to Daniel. "Heir Milner, I think you should deliver this to Leader Glisson," she added with a

teasing giggle.

“Shut up,” Daniel shot back, smiling as he took the tape from her. Holding it again after a month felt strange. The weight of the footage inside pressed against him like a burden renewed. His eyes flicked to Brenda. Meeting her gaze with determination, he said, “This time, I won’t lose. I promise.”

Brenda’s smile softened. “I know,” she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

As the three of them moved toward the exit, Olivia’s eyes drifted to the framed drawings on the wall. “He’s actually really talented. Why did he help him?” she murmured.

Brenda pointed at one of the papers. “Isn’t that Nivorum Square?” She stepped closer for a better look. “Look at the details. It’s flawless.”

“Wait a second,” Daniel said, his voice suddenly tense as he rushed toward the sketches. He tore one from the wall—a drawing of a man falling from a high building. Holding the paper in his hands, his eyes widened.

“He was there when you fell,” Olivia said in amazement.

Daniel shook his head. “No. I saw this drawing before I fell.”

Olivia stepped closer, her gaze sweeping across the other sketches. She pointed at another one. “And he didn’t know how we got caught by Leader Glisson,” she said, gesturing at an elevator sketch with a garbage container inside.

Brenda rubbed her chin, scanning the drawings quickly. Her eyes darted over the details on each page. “Past and future,” she murmured, her tone distant and thoughtful. She ran her fingers over each sketch. “A burning house, snakes slithering out of a hollow, a man with an arrow through his head… He wasn’t even with you on that mission.”

Daniel’s curiosity deepened. “What does this mean, Brenda?” he asked.

Olivia hesitated before answering, her voice uncertain, laced with disbelief. “Kevin can see the future.” But it sounded more like a question than a statement.

Brenda started pulling the drawings off the wall one by one. “Or he can draw it.”

CHAPTER XIII

DEATH

Daniel woke up in his own living quarters for the first time after a month spent in Lady Stewart's ruined house and Supreme Leader Glisson's secret office. The moment he opened his eyes, a deep unease settled within him. He got out of bed reluctantly. As an heir, he had no idea what he was supposed to do on his first morning. Things in Nivorum had become so chaotic that no one had found the time to guide him or give him instructions. He wasn't even sure if staying on the interns' floor was still appropriate.

His stomach rumbled loudly—he hadn't eaten since the morning before. The sensation was almost unbearable. He was so hungry that even Nivorum's strange food, which he normally wouldn't have wanted, now felt tempting.

At the end of the short corridor, he heard the distinct rustling of papers coming from the library. He pushed the door open and peeked inside.

Brenda was sitting at the desk, still in her new formal attire. She had pinned her hair up with a pencil and was hunched over, studying Kevin's drawings with intense focus. She kept switching between sketches, taking notes, and trying to decipher their meaning. Occasionally, she would remove her glasses and rub her reddened, sleep-deprived eyes. She was so absorbed in her work that she hadn't even noticed Daniel's presence.

Daniel leaned against the doorframe, watching her, lost in thought. He recalled the two months that had passed since Halley's appearance —the moment they first met. In those months, he had seen Brenda endure more than he could have imagined. Her fears, her nightmares, and the things she had faced played vividly in his mind. And yet, despite it all, her determination to survive and keep fighting deeply impressed him.

His thoughts drifted to the way she looked at him sometimes, and an involuntary smile formed on his lips. But just as he was about to get lost in the moment, a hand on his shoulder startled him.

"Enjoying the view?" Olivia whispered teasingly before giving him a playful nudge into the room. "Brenda! You've got a visitor," she announced with a grin.

Brenda looked up at them with red-rimmed eyes but didn't seem particularly surprised. In a calm voice, she said, "You're awake? Come

here," before turning back to the drawings. "Kevin really can depict the future and events he wasn't present for."

Daniel gestured at some of the papers, which resembled logos rather than actual drawings. "And what do these mean?" he asked.

Brenda glanced at the page and shrugged. "I don't know. Some of them seem completely meaningless."

Olivia picked up a sketch of two interwoven hourglasses and smirked. "Is this supposed to mean we're wasting our time?" she joked.

Daniel took the paper from her and examined it closely. "The Nivorum clock," he said, his voice thoughtful and certain.

Both girls exchanged glances before looking back at him, waiting for him to elaborate.

"Leader Glisson explained it," Daniel continued. "Time doesn't pass the same way here as it does in our world. One year in Nivorum is equivalent to seven and a half years back home."

Brenda quickly scribbled some notes and ran a few calculations. Then she looked up. "So… has it been a year and three months since we arrived?" she asked, not in shock, but with a curious expression.

Daniel nodded. "Yes."

Olivia's eyes darkened instantly. She staggered back a few steps and grabbed onto the table for support.

Daniel rushed to Olivia's side, grabbing her arm. "Are you okay?"

Brenda immediately stood up from the chair and stepped aside. Olivia sank into the now-empty seat, taking a deep breath.

Images of her family flooded her mind. She thought of her elderly parents—what had they been doing all this time, for over a year, without any news from her? The thought made her feel like she was losing her grip on reality. A sharp pain spread through her chest as she imagined how much might have changed in her brother's life. The emotions she had been suppressing for so long resurfaced violently.

"My mother, my father, my brother… I have to leave. As soon as possible," she choked out.

Brenda knelt in front of her, taking Olivia's hand in hers. Looking into her eyes with unwavering determination, she said, "We'll find a way. We can. You know that." Her voice was soft but firm.

Daniel stepped forward, his tone just as resolute. "We'll get you back to your family. I promise."

Olivia took a deep breath and nodded, wiping away the tears that had begun to well up in her eyes. She tried to steady herself as she flipped through Kevin's drawings. "Is there a clue?" she asked, a flicker of hope in her voice. "A drawing of the future… something that shows us leaving. Anything that hints at a way out of Nivorum."

Brenda squeezed her shoulder gently. "No," she said, still scanning

the papers.

Olivia continued shuffling through the sketches until she pulled out an image of a grave. Her hands froze. Her lips trembled as she whispered, “Who is going to die?”

Brenda immediately leaned in, adjusting her glasses to examine the drawing more closely.

“There’s a crown,” Daniel pointed out, gesturing at the sketch. “Maybe it’s not about Nivorum at all.”

Brenda fell into deep thought before murmuring under her breath, “Supreme Leader Valtorin.”

A heavy silence settled over the library. The three of them exchanged glances, unspoken questions swirling in their minds. A quiet storm of thoughts took hold of them as they tried to make sense of what they had just uncovered.

It was Olivia who finally broke the silence. “If Vulton Valtorin dies…”

Brenda finished her sentence. “Sylvester takes control of everything.”

Daniel grabbed the paper and sprinted toward the elevator. Brenda and Olivia immediately followed, realizing he was heading straight for Leader Glisson. Daniel pressed the button repeatedly, his mind fixated on one thing—warning Glisson and finding a way to change what was about to happen.

A sharp chime rang out as the elevator reached their floor. Through the glass panel on the door, Glisson’s face appeared. As Daniel pulled open the metal door, Glisson swiftly unlatched the protective gate inside.

“Hurry!” Glisson shouted, his voice laced with panic. “I need to get you all out of here immediately.” He gestured urgently, motioning for them to step inside.

The three of them froze, momentarily thrown off by Glisson’s distress. They exchanged bewildered glances, hesitating.

“We don’t have time,” Glisson urged again, his voice sharp with urgency.

“Supreme Leader Valtorin is going to die,” Daniel said, his voice steady.

Glisson turned to him, his expression grave. “He’s already dead!” he bellowed. “Sylvester killed him. Now get in!”

Brenda and Olivia gasped, horror flashing in their eyes before shifting into pure terror. Without a second thought, they threw themselves into the elevator, their minds scrambling to process what they had just heard.

Daniel hesitated for a brief moment. Then, with firm resolve, he said, “I need to get the drawings. You go ahead. I’ll be right behind

you."

"Forget it," Olivia snapped.

Brenda reached out, trying to pull him into the elevator. But instead of stepping inside, he took her hand for a brief moment, squeezing it reassuringly. His voice was calm yet unwavering. "I promise I'll come."

Then, without waiting for another word, he turned and sprinted back toward the library.

As the elevator doors began to close, Glisson shouted after him, "Go through the parking entrance across from the elevators! Be quick!"

***

Daniel gathered all the drawings after ten minutes of frantic effort. He yanked open a drawer in the library, dumped its contents onto the floor, stuffed the papers inside, and clutched it tightly. Without wasting another second, he dashed toward the elevator.

As soon as he closed the elevator door and scanned the symbol on his wrist, he noticed far more buttons lighting up on the panel than before. This was the first tangible effect of his heir title—a title that no longer meant anything to him. Panicked, he pressed the button for the ground floor.

When the elevator reached its destination, Daniel burst into the entrance hall. The air was thick with tension. Sirens wailed, and large groups of people were frantically rushing in every direction. The ground floor of the main building was in utter chaos.

His eyes locked onto Leader Glisson and his friends, who were waiting at the door across from him. He was about to move toward them when, from his left, another elevator slid open.

Sylvester stepped out, flanked by Kevin and three soldiers. His ice-cold eyes immediately locked onto Daniel's, burning with an unmistakable rage. His every step, heavy with fury, could be felt even from a distance.

Without a second of hesitation, Daniel shouted, "He's here! Run!"

His voice cut through the chaos, drawing immediate attention. Though no one knew exactly who he was referring to, his warning sent an electric jolt through the already panicked crowd. Instinct took over—people shoved and scrambled in every direction, spiraling into complete disorder.

Daniel threw himself into the crowd, pushing forward toward the parking lot. He gripped the drawer tightly, weaving through the chaos as bodies dashed past him. He dodged flailing arms and frantic figures, doing his best to avoid collisions while keeping his focus on

his goal. No matter what, he couldn't afford to drop the drawer.

Meanwhile, Sylvester advanced with the soldiers at his back, forcing his way through the mass of people as if tearing through them. The fury in his icy gaze was enough to make those around him recoil.

Moving straight ahead was impossible in the chaos. Daniel had to weave his way through, sometimes lunging forward, sometimes veering to the right. Knowing Sylvester was coming from the left, he was careful not to drift in that direction.

By the time he finally reached the parking garage, he spotted a car moving. Leader Glisson was behind the wheel, and in the back seat, he saw Brenda and Olivia. Both were staring at him through the rear window, their faces a mixture of worry and panic.

For a brief moment, the car stopped. Daniel clutched the drawer against his chest and sprinted toward them. Just then, a streak of bright light shot past him, striking the car's rear window with a loud explosion. The glass shattered, echoing through the garage. A second beam hit the taillight, sending shards of red plastic scattering across the ground.

Realizing the danger, Glisson panicked and slammed his foot on the gas, speeding the car out of the parking garage.

"Catch that car! Leave this son of a bitch to me!" Sylvester roared, his voice booming through the space. It dripped with venom—his sheer rage was palpable.

The three soldiers beside him sprang into action. They open a garage door to the left and rushed inside. Mounting the parked motorcycles, they revved the engines and tore after Glisson's car.

Meanwhile, Sylvester strode toward Daniel with unshaken confidence. He reached down, touching the symbol embroidered on his trousers. Whips, shimmering with stardust, materialized in his hands. With a flick of his arm, he lashed out—aiming straight for the symbol on Daniel's wristband.

But this time, Daniel was ready. He dodged to the side, barely avoiding the strike, using the drawer as a shield to absorb some of the impact. Kevin's drawings scattered everywhere from the force of the impact.

Without hesitation, he reached for his wristband, summoned his crossbow into his hand, and took cover behind a nearby bus.

Sylvester let out a vile laugh. "So, you've got the guts to pull a weapon on the Supreme Leader, intern?"

"I think you meant heir," Daniel shot back, loosing his first arrow. The glowing projectile whizzed through the air, heading straight for Sylvester.

With expert precision, Sylvester cracked his whip, striking the arrow mid-flight. It exploded into a burst of light before vanishing.

“Looks like I underestimated you. Just like you’re underestimating me,” he sneered, his voice laced with mockery.

Then, with a swift motion, he lashed his brilliant weapons through the air again. Two massive beams of light hurtled toward Daniel’s position.

Daniel swiftly ducked behind the bus. A deafening clang echoed off the steel surface. But almost immediately after, a familiar burning sensation seared his shoulder. Sylvester’s second strike had found its mark, hitting the exposed shoulder he had failed to shield. With a sharp groan, he pulled back further.

“Oh, come on. Giving up already? We’re just getting started,” Sylvester taunted, his voice thick with amusement as he slowly advanced toward Daniel’s hiding spot.

Daniel crouched low, his face nearly touching the ground. One hand clutched his wounded shoulder while the other struggled to grip his crossbow. He could see Sylvester’s approaching steps. His mind was clouded, but he had no choice but to trust his instincts. Extending his crossbow beneath the bus, he fired blindly. Without waiting to see where the bolt would strike, he darted further behind the vehicle.

A guttural, throat-tearing groan erupted from Sylvester. Daniel knew he had landed a hit. As he silently moved around to the back of the bus, Sylvester’s furious curses echoed through the parking lot.

Now limping from pain, Sylvester pressed forward. He let one of his whips drop to the ground, causing it to vanish. With his free hand, he touched his symbol and conjured a shield. The fight had changed—he finally acknowledged that Daniel, armed, was a real threat. Sheltering behind the shield, he crept closer to the bus. With a flick of his wrist, he lashed his whip toward where he suspected Daniel to be. Then, tilting his head slightly, he checked—only to see his attack strike nothing but the metallic surface before dissipating.

Meanwhile, Daniel had slipped around the back of the bus and made his way toward the garage the soldiers had opened. His eyes scanned the row of motorcycles lined up inside. One, in particular, caught his attention.

The massive bike at the front was far larger and more powerful than anything he had ridden before. Its angular design and square-shaped headlight gave it an imposing, almost alien allure. Instinctively, he placed his symbol into the ignition. The engine roared to life, its deep growl reverberating through the garage. After readying his crossbow, he lightly tapped the body of the motorcycle. “Hope you work the same way I remember,” he muttered.

Twisting the throttle to its limit, he released the clutch. The rear tire spun in place for a brief moment before the motorcycle shot forward with blistering speed.

As he burst out of the enclosed garage into the parking lot, Daniel struggled to control the machine. It was far faster than he expected, and he barely managed to turn left. Just as he tore toward the exit at full throttle, he spotted Sylvester standing beside the bus where he had been hiding moments ago. Raising his crossbow, he fired.

Seeing Daniel attempt to escape, Sylvester raised his whip, ready to strike. But the moment he noticed the glowing bolt streaking toward him, he realized he had no time. He swiftly raised his shield. The bolt struck the shield at eye level with a loud blast before gradually fading away.

***

Daniel shot onto Nivorum's main avenue at full speed. He had only ridden a motorcycle this fast once before—the night they collided with the comet. And back then, he had been half-drunk. Now, the situation wasn't much different. But this time, it wasn't alcohol controlling his body; it was the power of the symbol.

He glanced at the dials on the handlebars and was met with an analog gauge instead of the holographic displays he was used to. The primitive-looking needle was nearing the 260 mark.

Weaving past a few cars, he spotted a vehicle with a shattered rear window just ahead. Glisson's car. Brenda and Olivia were inside.

Brenda turned and saw the motorcycle rapidly approaching. The moment she recognized Daniel, her entire body relaxed—relief flooding through her.

"He's behind us!" she shouted, her voice filled with joy.

But the relief didn't last long. Just seconds later, her pupils dilated, and her body tensed again. In a sharp, high-pitched voice, she screamed, "Sylvester is right behind him!"

Leader Glisson glanced in the rearview mirror. Two motorcycles were racing toward them. Keeping one hand steady on the wheel, he extended the other out the window, gripping his glowing weapon before firing backward.

The first bullet, made from star dust, struck the asphalt just behind the car, sending up a small explosion. The second hit the square headlight of Daniel's motorcycle.

Smoke curled up from the front of the bike as Daniel flinched but managed to keep control.

"You're going to kill him!" Brenda shrieked in panic.

"I can't protect him while driving," Glisson replied, pulling his arm back inside. His jaw tightened as he refocused on the road.

Daniel barely had time to process what had just happened. Raising one hand, he tried to signal them not to shoot, realizing Glisson and

the others had mistaken him for a Nivorum soldier. He accelerated the motorcycle, closing the gap between them. But as his speed increased, the wind battered his face with even greater force. His eyes began to water, his vision blurring.

Behind him, Sylvester behind him had almost closed the distance. Seeing that his prey was unaware, he raised his left hand with a dark grin; his whip gleamed in his palm.

Brenda's breath caught when she spotted the familiar glint of Sylvester's weapon. He had used that whip on her many times before during his visits to her home. But now, she knew without a doubt that this time, he would wield it against Daniel with far greater force.

Fear and fury warred inside her. Every vein in her body tensed. Heat surged through her lower arm, burning from her elbow to the vulture-symbol ring on her finger. It felt as though fire was flowing through her veins.

Sylvester lifted his whip higher, ready to strike. Daniel was still oblivious—seconds away from being caught off guard.

Brenda's terrified eyes locked onto the scene unfolding behind them. Her breath came in short gasps. Sylvester was about to lash out.

"No!"

The word tore from her throat, raw and desperate. She thrust her arm out of the car's rear window, her hand opening as if to halt the whip midair. The burning sensation in her arm flared violently, surging from her ring into her palm.

Then, all at once, a fierce ball of fire erupted from Brenda's hand, hurtling toward the motorcycles at blistering speed.

The moment Daniel caught the flash of light from the car ahead, instinct took over—he ducked. The fireball blazed past, just inches above his head. Scorching heat seared the air around him, and his eyes widened in shock. He glanced into his mirror in horror. For the first time, he realized Sylvester was pursuing him.

Sylvester spotted the fireball at the last moment. His eyes went wide with fear, and he instinctively yanked the handlebars, swerving hard to the left. But at such high speed, the tires—unprepared for such an abrupt maneuver—lost grip on the road. His motorcycle spun out of control, skidding beneath him. The impact sent Sylvester crashing against the asphalt, dragged along at a brutal velocity until he slammed into the curb.

Brenda let out a triumphant scream and threw her arms around Olivia. "I did it! I did it!" she cried, her voice bursting with exhilaration.

Daniel saw Glisson pulling the car over to the side of the road. Without hesitation, he stopped his motorcycle behind it and quickly made his way toward them. The moment Brenda flung open the door,

she rushed straight into his arms. The pride of her victory and the relief of seeing him safe crashed together in an overwhelming wave. She clung to him tightly.

Leader Glisson and Olivia stepped out of the car as well. Glisson watched Brenda embrace Daniel for a brief moment before speaking in a firm, urgent tone. “Lets go! We don’t have time for this.” He motioned for them to follow.

Together, they hurried toward the Nivorum Gateway across the road. Even from a distance, the chaos unfolding in front of the gateway’s single-story building was unmistakable. Beams of blue, green, and red light streaked across the battlefield, colliding in midair, sending shimmering clouds of dust raining down like a miniature storm.

Suddenly, Oscar appeared beside them. “Be careful. The soldiers have orders to kill us,” he warned before vanishing just as swiftly back into the fray.

Daniel and the others advanced cautiously toward the conflict. Leader Glisson summoned a weapon from his symbol, then turned to them with a sharp command. “Find a safe place. And don’t even think about sticking your noses out.”

Brenda and Olivia sprinted toward a tall black SUV parked nearby, using the vehicle as cover. The metal frame provided a solid barrier against the chaos.

But Daniel hesitated for no more than a second. Determination flashed in his eyes as he summoned his crossbow from his symbol. Then, without another word, he plunged straight into battle.

Amid the turmoil, he recognized the familiar faces fighting around him. These were the same people he had seen at Fast Cups, night after night. Somehow, they had all become part of this war.

“I’m right behind you!” Daniel called as he ran after Leader Glisson. He took cover behind the same granite pillar and grinned. “I’m the hero of this story. Have you forgotten?”

Leader Glisson shook his head. “Try not to die, hero,” he said before raising his weapon and opening fire.

Daniel stepped out just enough to aim his crossbow. Across the battlefield, about twenty soldiers in long coats fired their standard-issue luminous rifles. He recognized them instantly. These were the same guards who had stood watch at the gateway the night he first arrived in Nivorum.

He locked onto his target and fired—only to watch the arrow veer off course and crash into a distant wall before vanishing. His breath caught as he ducked back behind the pillar.

While he reloaded, bursts of light streaked across the battlefield. Lando’s luminous pistol and Oscar’s razor-sharp, glowing glass shards

struck down a few soldiers—but it wasn't enough. The enemy's assault remained relentless.

Daniel rose for a second shot. This time, he aimed directly at a soldier's head and fired. But again, the arrow veered wildly, vanishing in a completely different direction. A mix of shock and frustration flashed across his face.

Leader Glisson saw him freeze and immediately grabbed his arm, yanking him down behind cover. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?" he shouted, his voice sharp with urgency.

"I can't do it," Daniel murmured, his voice brittle. It was the first time he had failed since mastering weapon summoning.

"Now is not the time, Daniel! Focus!"

Daniel swallowed hard, forcing himself to clear his mind. He thought about their situation. About Glisson. About Brenda and Olivia. About what Sylvester would do if they didn't make it out of here. That fear hardened into resolve. Taking a deep breath, he stood and prepared to fire again.

But as he locked onto the soldiers' faces, a chill ran down his spine.

They were identical.

Every single one of them bore the same face. A face he had seen before. A face that had haunted his nightmares for a long time.

The face of the man he had killed in Gardenville.

His stomach twisted.

Leader Glisson, noticing Daniel frozen again, grabbed him and pulled him down sharply. "What the hell do you think you're doing, Daniel? Snap out of it!" he barked.

"I can't," Daniel whispered. "They…"

Glisson shielded them both as bursts of stardust exploded around them. "They what, Daniel? Talk!" he demanded impatiently.

Daniel barely heard him. The war raging around them had faded, drowned out by the storm in his mind. His fingers trembled around his crossbow. "They didn't want to be here either," he muttered, almost to himself. "Just like you and me."

"They all work for Sylvester now, Daniel. You have to accept that."

Daniel turned to him, and without thinking, said, "Just like you work for Vulton Valtorin."

The words had barely left his lips before regret flooded his face.

He saw it immediately—the way Glisson's expression darkened, the way his eyes dulled with disappointment. He had just wounded the man who had been helping him all this time, and he had done it with nothing but words.

He wanted to say something. To take it back. To fix it.

But he didn't know how.

Glisson held his gaze for a long, heavy moment. Then, in a voice

cold and absolute, he said, “Then don’t bother sticking your head out again.”

Daniel fired two more arrows. This time, he focused—steadying his breath, aiming carefully. But once again, the arrows veered off, striking completely irrelevant spots. His breathing quickened, frustration evident on his face.

Leaning his back against the granite pillar, he fell silent.

Fifteen minutes passed. The relentless downpour of stardust and glowing bullets finally ceased.

Daniel sat there, his breath heavy, his shoulder aching. The battle was over.

Then, a blur of motion—Oscar flashed past them, teleporting to the gateway entrance. He turned sharply and called out, “Clear!”

“We’re moving,” Glisson commanded. His voice was firm, offering no room for hesitation. He stepped out from behind the pillar and started toward the stairs.

Daniel remained where he was for a moment, his eyes drifting over the battlefield.

Bodies lay motionless on the ground. Others groaned in pain. Some of the familiar faces he had often seen sitting at Fast Cups were now lifeless. The people whose laughter he once remembered were now writhing in pain.

The weight in his chest only deepened.

Brenda and Olivia emerged from behind the car where they had been hiding and ran toward the others. When they reached Daniel, they were met with his pale, somber expression.

“Are you okay?” Olivia asked.

Daniel simply nodded. But that small motion did nothing to hide the disappointment on his face or the turmoil in his mind. Regret over what he had said to Glisson, the sting of failure, and the grim reality around him churned inside him like a storm.

Brenda stepped closer, gripping his arm firmly. “Everything we do in this world, we do because we have to,” she said in a reassuring tone. She could only grasp a fraction of what was running through his mind, but she wanted him to hear the words nonetheless.

“Don’t dawdle!” Leader Glisson yelled. He had already reached the entrance, standing beside Oscar with an impatient expression.

Olivia took a deep breath. “Come on. Let’s go home.”

For so long, she had dreamed of this moment, yet the weight of the countless lifeless bodies surrounding them made it impossible to embrace it with joy.

Together, they moved forward. Just minutes ago, the soldiers lying on the ground had been firing at them. Now, they stepped past the fallen bodies and approached the entrance, where Lando and Oscar

were waiting.

Inside the building that housed the gateway, their way out of Nivorum stood right before them. This was the moment that signified freedom for all of them.

In the blink of an eye, Oscar moved to the transparent-screen panel at the gateway's entrance. Right beside him, Morgan Wilson's lifeless body lay motionless on the ground.

Daniel glanced at Wilson for a brief moment, but Olivia's voice quickly pulled his attention away.

"Heir Cooper is coming. There's someone with him," Olivia said.

A glimmer appeared in Leader Glisson's eyes. "Finally," he muttered, immediately turning toward the gate, scanning the battlefield carefully.

A few seconds later, a car pulled up by the roadside. Heir Timothy Cooper swiftly stepped out from the driver's seat. As the rear door opened, Lady Emilia Valtorin's white-painted hair billowed in the wind.

Leader Glisson's face lit up with a genuine smile at the sight of her. For an instant, everything around him seemed to shift. The battlefield blurred, replaced by the image of a garden—the home they had once shared years ago. But as Lady Valtorin knelt beside the wounded, reality crashed back down upon him.

As she walked toward the gateway, she paused beside the injured. The symbol dangling from her necklace shimmered faintly, and with each touch, the wounded began to heal rapidly.

"Leader Glisson, I've brought Lady Valtorin," Timothy Cooper announced.

Glisson, overwhelmed by emotions and the chaos around him, struggled to find the right words. Finally, he managed to say only, "This city is dangerous for you too."

Lady Valtorin gave a slight nod. She was just about to respond when Oscar's voice interrupted.

"It's ready. We can use the gateway now," he called from the control panel.

Leader Glisson took a deep breath. "Let's go," he ordered in a firm tone. "We're leaving this place."

Without hesitation, they rushed toward the dark corridor, where a yellow light shimmered at the end.

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As Daniel emerged from the void that had enveloped his body while using the gateway, sensation slowly returned. The swirling energy around him faded, revealing a very familiar sight—along with

the bewildered expressions of the others.

"Where are we?" Olivia asked, glancing around the cluttered room.

Daniel's eyes widened as he took in the scene. His gaze locked onto his messy bed, the books scattered across his desk, and the photograph of Emily hanging on the wall. A flicker of joy and astonishment crossed his face.

"We're in my home," he said.

Brenda took a deep breath, a small, relieved smile forming on her lips. "It's over," she murmured.

But behind them, old Oscar remained with his gaze locked on the still-glowing gateway, shaking his head. "This wasn't supposed to happen. The gateway should have opened to Vlosford," he said, his voice tight with worry.

Realizing the small room would be uncomfortable for the group, Daniel turned toward the door. "Let's move inside," he suggested, stepping forward. He reached for the doorknob—but his hand passed right through it.

He froze.

Startled, he tried again. His fingers slipped through as if the object wasn't even there.

Then, they noticed it.

A strange green shimmer coated the entire room. Objects began to glow, their edges warping and melting like wax under heat. One by one, the walls dissolved, replaced by swirling clouds of brown dust.

"An illusion," Leader Glisson muttered, frustration and anger tightening his voice. His sharp eyes scanned the shifting space, trying to piece together where they truly were.

As the last remnants of the illusion faded, the eerie green glow condensed into a single point. The shimmering light coiled and slithered toward Leader Holloway's cane, as he stood before them—flanked by a squad of heavily armed soldiers and several other leaders.

A cold smirk played at Holloway's lips. "You've broken at least eight or ten Nivorum laws," he said, his tone mocking. The overwhelming advantage of his forces against their small group was clear—even in his voice. "If your little game is over, surrender. Emilia, step forward. Sylvester wants you for himself."

Lady Emilia Valtorin's eyes darkened with fury. She stared at the massive man with sheer disgust, her voice laced with bitterness. "You were Vulton's friend. How can you say this?"

Holloway's expression remained indifferent. "I'm sorry, Emilia. The power lies with Sylvester now."

A shadow loomed behind them. The still-glowing gateway pulsed as Sylvester stepped through, his movements slightly stiff from his

injuries. But the arrogant smirk on his face remained intact.

"Yes, Emilia," he said, his voice dripping with poisonous confidence. "The power is mine."

"Don't you dare call me by my name!" Lady Valtorin snapped.

Sylvester's smirk widened. "Alright, mommy." His voice was sickly sweet, dripping with mockery. "Now, let's see how this plays out. Brenda and Emilia will come with me."

Then, his gaze slid to Olivia. The corner of his mouth curled into something even uglier.

"I could make some room for you in my bed as well," he sneered. "Lando, Timothy, and that old waiter can stay here. A lovely place to die."

Finally, his eyes locked onto Daniel. His voice dipped into something even darker.

"You, however… you will beg for death. But I'll do everything I can to keep you alive."

A shiver rippled through the group. Sylvester's smirk widened.

"Ladies, this way."

No one moved. Not a single word was spoken. Everyone glanced at one another, searching for an escape route in their minds. The silence became almost tangible.

It was Brenda who finally broke it. "She will never love you, Hugo," she said.

She had found a crack in his mind—something that could truly get under his skin for the first time.

"Shut up," Sylvester hissed, trembling with rage.

"She would be disgusted if she knew what you've become. She's lucky. She'll never have to know that she gave birth to something so vile. You murdered your own father for a foolish grudge. She would never be proud of you. From now on, every time you close your eyes, you'll see Helena Stewart's face filled with hatred for you."

"I SAID SHUT UP!" Sylvester roared, yanking his whip free. Despite his uneven steps, he lunged at Brenda, driven by fury.

That was when Leader Glisson struck.

He suddenly spread his arms wide; a glowing vulture symbol was in each of his hands. As energy surged from the symbols, a powerful artificial wind swept toward Sylvester and Holloway.

Dust particles on the ground stirred under the force of the wind, rising into the air and slashing against their faces like tiny blades. Sylvester and Holloway stumbled back, shielding their eyes as they struggled against the storm. Even the soldiers around them abandoned their weapons, too preoccupied with protecting themselves.

"Run!" Leader Glisson shouted.

The group bolted toward the gateway.

Oscar had already reached the control panel, his fingers frantically tapping the transparent screen rapidly.

As she passed Sylvester, Brenda seized her moment. With all the fury of months of suffering, she drove her fist into his stomach.

The sand striking his face had blinded him to the incoming blow. He doubled over, letting out a pained groan as he collapsed to the ground.

"Hurry up, go!" Oscar shouted. He tried to motion toward the gateway, but the wind-driven dust blurred his vision.

Daniel, Brenda, Olivia, and Heir Cooper dashed through the gateway. Lady Valtorin remained behind, stopping just at its threshold.

For a brief moment, she hesitated and glanced back. The dust storm was weakening. As her vision cleared slightly, she saw Glisson kneeling between Sylvester and Holloway.

Glisson slowly sat down. The wind that had surged from the symbols in his hands had completely died down. The airborne dust lost its momentum, ceasing its wild dance and drifting back to the ground. Sylvester and Holloway could finally see their surroundings again. The soldiers, regaining their composure, picked up their weapons once more.

The moment Sylvester realized everyone had escaped, his rage erupted like a volcano. His eyes blazed, turning blood-red with fury. With a violent motion, he summoned his whip and spoke in a cold, venomous voice:

"My father should have killed you the moment he first saw you."

His hatred poured from him like a palpable force.

Glisson slowly turned toward Sylvester from where he sat. His gaze flickered to Lady Valtorin, who stood tall in front of the gateway.

For a brief moment, he hesitated—familiar eyes from long ago filled his mind. A faint smile curled his lips. This time, he tried to say the farewell he never could, through nothing but his eyes.

At that very instant, a beam of crimson light lashed out from Sylvester's whip, coiling around Glisson in an instant. The searing glow didn't just blind him—it wiped out his consciousness in a flash. His face went blank for a split second before his body crumpled to the ground.

"No!" Lady Valtorin's scream tore through the air, sharp enough to pierce the ears of everyone around her.

All eyes snapped toward her.

Sylvester, only now realizing she was still there, felt his fury deepen into something even darker. With pure malice, he roared:

"Kill her!"

The soldiers beside Holloway didn't hesitate. They immediately

raised their weapons.

At that moment, Oscar slammed his hand on a button on the panel and lunged toward the gateway. The gateway began to dim, swirling into a dark vortex as its light started to fade.

Then, without hesitation, he threw himself in front of Lady Valtorin.

The soldiers had their weapons trained on her, but he had already made himself a shield. With one final push, he shoved the woman through the fading gateway.

“Get inside!” he shouted.

Lady Valtorin lost her balance and tumbled into the gateway.

The last thing she saw before the glowing gateway vanished was the lifeless body of old Oscar collapsing to the ground.

CHAPTER XIV

CAVE

Daniel sat a little apart from the rest of the group, leaning against a small rock. The burning sensation in his shoulder was interwoven with the crushing weight of regret; his physical pain felt insignificant compared to the heaviness in his soul.

The gateway had transported them to the peak of a high hill. Amid the scattered shrubs around them, a lone, ancient tree stood tall. From here, they had a clear view of the endless snowy green grasslands stretching as far as the eye could see.

Brenda approached hesitantly. “Can I sit?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Daniel only nodded. His gaze remained fixed on the horizon, unfocused and distant. Accepting Leader Glisson’s death felt impossible. In such a short time, the man had become almost a father figure to him, and now he was gone. If he had been given a choice, he was certain—without hesitation—that he would have chosen his father’s death instead.

“Are you okay, Daniel?”

Without shifting his gaze, he replied in a hoarse voice. “They died to protect us.”

“I know,” Brenda said as she sat beside him. “Leader Glisson sacrificed himself to save us all. He was a brave and noble man.”

“He was angry at me,” Daniel murmured, finally turning his eyes toward her. A single tear trembled at the edge of his lashes before slipping down his cheek. “On our way to the gateway… I said something I shouldn’t have.”

Brenda took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Then, with a gentle motion, she wiped the tear from his face. Her fingers trembled slightly, but her voice remained steady.

“He wasn’t angry at you,” she said, looking straight into his eyes. “If he was, he wouldn’t have done what he did.”

Daniel lowered his head. “That only makes it hurt more,” he whispered. “He’ll never know that I regret what I said.”

Brenda moved a little closer. Her fingertip traced soothing circles against his cheek.

“He knew, Daniel. Don’t worry. He asked me to provoke Sylvester. It was exactly what he had in mind. He spoke to me inside his mind.”

Daniel looked at her in silence, torn between believing her and

doubting it.

Brenda, reading the uncertainty in his eyes, gave him a small smile. “I saw it there, Daniel. He wasn’t angry with you. Trust me.”

Daniel nodded again. He wasn’t sure if she was telling the truth, but somehow, the weight inside him felt a little lighter.

“I’m telling the truth,” Brenda said. But there was a flicker of unease in her voice. Pressing her lips together, she struggled with the discomfort of lying. Yet, she felt she had no choice—Daniel needed this to move forward.

“Do you have to read everything I think?” he asked, keeping his tone as soft as possible.

“Sometimes,” Brenda answered.

Their conversation was interrupted by a voice calling out from a short distance away.

“Milner, Lewis… Get over here,” Cooper called, gesturing toward an old truck approaching from the other side of the hill.

Both of them immediately rose to their feet and hurried back to join the others beneath the tree.

Lady Valtorin sat with her back against the trunk, her tear-streaked face betraying the weight of her grief. Her eyes, red and swollen from crying, reflected the pain she carried. Her once-white hair was now streaked with brown dust from the storm they had barely escaped.

Cooper fixed his eyes on the approaching truck and warned, “Be ready for anything.”

The moment he finished speaking, he pulled up the mask hanging around his neck, covering his face.

Daniel swiftly reached for his symbol, staying on high alert.

Brenda, however, wasn’t entirely sure what to do. She simply gripped Daniel’s arm tightly and stared at the approaching truck.

Olivia moved to stand directly behind Cooper, her gaze locked onto the vehicle. Within seconds, her body language relaxed, and she let out a relieved breath.

“No need,” she said clearly enough for everyone to hear. “She is not hostile.”

Cooper turned to the Nivorum intern with a proud glance. “Is it just one person?” he asked.

“Yes.”

A few moments later, the truck came to a stop ahead of them. The door creaked open, and a young woman with long blonde hair stepped out.

Her face was smudged with dirt, her dress torn in multiple places, and her hair had lost its shine—clear signs of hardship. Yet despite it all, the smile on her small face had not faded. A lively spark still shone in her green eyes.

Cooper stared at her in disbelief. Under his mask, he whispered in a hushed voice, “Serena!”

Serena Watson smiled and took a few steps closer. “It’s been a long time. I wasn’t expecting to see you here,” she said before stepping forward and hugging him without hesitation.

After their brief but genuine embrace, her tone turned more serious.

“Where is Leader Glisson?” she asked. Her gaze swept over the group before she added, “I thought he was only sending one person.”

Timothy Cooper’s blue eyes wavered slightly. Slowly, he lowered his head and stared at the ground. His lips parted, but no words came out.

Serena’s expression shifted. A sinking unease settled in her chest as she turned to look at the others.

But no one said a word.

The only sound was the gentle rustling of the old tree’s leaves as the breeze swayed them softly.

Then, Lady Valtorin’s voice broke the silence, trembling with grief as fresh tears streamed down her face.

“Lando is dead.”

***

It had been a few hours since they had taken shelter in a cave halfway up a small hillside, arriving there in Serena’s truck. Daniel recognized this place from the letter she had written. From the outside, it appeared to be nothing more than a narrow and gloomy entrance, but inside, it was no different from a town.

Staircases led deep into the cave, connecting to dozens of different levels. Carved tunnels branched into spacious chambers. Torches mounted on the walls illuminated the dark corridors.

When Serena Watson learned about Lady Valtorin’s ability, she had struggled to hide her excitement. She had eagerly tried to convince her to descend to the infirmary level, where workers from the mines and victims of gang attacks were treated.

“You can help us,” she had pleaded desperately. “The people down there need you.”

Lady Valtorin had accepted without a moment’s hesitation. She knew that keeping herself occupied would be the only way to numb the pain of her loss. Heir Cooper had immediately joined her, refusing to leave her side.

Meanwhile, Daniel, Brenda, and Olivia sat in another chamber where Serena conducted her work, silently perched on a stone-carved bench. The weight of Leader Glisson’s death had settled over them,

pressing down like an unbearable force. Words felt unnecessary.

Despite the silence, Serena remained patient. After waiting a while, she finally spoke in a gentle yet curious tone.

"I'd like to know what happened," she said softly. "If you're able to talk about it…"

"To put it simply, Sylvester wants us dead. Leader Glisson sacrificed himself to protect us," Olivia said. Her face reflected a mix of emotions—anger toward Sylvester, sorrow for Leader Glisson's loss, frustration at being unable to return home, and the dull misery of being trapped inside a cave. They all surfaced at once.

"He wants me dead more than anyone," Daniel corrected, his voice cold.

Brenda's expression twisted in disgust as she recalled Sylvester's demand.

"I'd rather die," she said firmly.

Serena's gaze sharpened. Her curiosity only grew stronger.

"Nivorum is a terrible place," she admitted. "But they don't outright kill people."

"I'm guessing you don't know Sylvester very well," Olivia said knowingly.

"Actually, I do. He was a strange kid. We were on different floors, but I was around him a few times. He used to lose his mind whenever someone called him by his real name."

"He killed his father today," Brenda said suddenly. Her voice made the heavy atmosphere in the room even colder. She swallowed hard, forcing down the words lodged in her throat, then added, "And then he killed Leader Glisson."

Serena's eyes widened, her breath becoming uneven. "This… how?" she whispered. Her jaw slackened as she struggled to form coherent thoughts, but no logical sentence came together. The shock spread through every part of her body.

Brenda stared blankly into space, her gaze completely frozen. "If they find us…" she started, but didn't finish the sentence. She didn't need to—everyone in the room already knew how it would end.

Serena took a deep breath, trying to shake off the shock and reassure them. "Don't worry. Nivorum doesn't know about this place."

"But the gangs do," Daniel said, recalling what he had read in the letter.

Serena's voice dropped to a whisper. "Yes." She took another deep breath before adding, "But they were exiled from the city as well. They can't report back to Nivorum."

"Then what are you doing here?" Daniel asked.

Serena locked eyes with him. "We're trying to survive."

"By surviving, do you mean helping Leader Glisson?" Daniel

pressed, his gaze unwavering. “What’s so important about this cave?”

Serena let out a long sigh, pausing for a few seconds to think. Finally, she decided that the people who had been with Leader Glisson were worth trusting.

“There are gas reserves beneath this cave that connect to the Nivorum mines. On the lower levels, we extract a portion of it for ourselves. We process it and send it to Leader Glisson.”

“What is this gas used for?” Olivia asked.

“Everything. Nivorum uses it both as fuel and in medical supplies.”

Daniel frowned. “And Leader Glisson?”

“I don’t know.”

His eyes immediately flicked to Brenda, searching for confirmation.

“She really doesn’t know,” Brenda said, holding Serena’s gaze for a few moments before nodding slightly. “We can trust her.”

“I already told you I didn’t know,” Serena muttered, unaware of Brenda’s ability. “We send the gas in tubes. I don’t know what he uses it for.”

“I do,” Brenda said, her voice distant.

Everyone in the stone chamber turned to her, waiting for an answer.

“While he was training me privately last week, I was inside a glass tank twice a day. In that room, the tank was connected to one of the tubes she just mentioned.”

“How do you know it was the same one?” Olivia asked.

Brenda shot her a direct look. “I don’t know, I just guessed,” she said, then added sarcastically, “It’s not like I can read Serena’s mind.”

Serena, still unfamiliar with the dynamics between the three of them, furrowed her brows. “A single tube?” she asked. “We’ve sent him hundreds just this year alone.”

Before Daniel could even ask his next question, Brenda quickly read his mind and said, “Yes, it works.”

Then, without another word, she extended her hand toward the pile of wooden planks in the center of the cave. A small burst of fire shot from her fingertips, igniting the dry wood instantly.

As the fire’s trembling glow spread across the room, different emotions flickered in each of their eyes—Daniel was astonished, Olivia was awestruck, and Serena was simply delighted.

“But what would he need hundreds of tubes for?” Brenda asked, the fire’s glow casting shifting shadows across her face.

“That’s something only Cooper can answer,” Daniel said.

***

Daniel descended several levels down the carefully carved stone steps of the cave. As he moved through the long corridor, he encountered dozens of different faces. The sheer number of people living here surprised him. The narrow passageway almost resembled a street. The entire underground city was illuminated by torches mounted at the ends of iron pipes fixed to the walls. Shadows danced in the flickering firelight, making the atmosphere feel even more somber.

After walking for a few hundred meters, he finally reached the infirmary.

He stepped inside quietly. The large space was divided by dozens of curtains, creating separate areas for each bed. The muffled groans seeping through the gaps made it clear just how widespread suffering was in this place. Further ahead, he heard a woman's trembling voice, nearly in tears, whispering words of gratitude.

Just then, one of the curtains was drawn back. Heir Cooper and Lady Valtorin stepped out.

"We need to talk," Daniel said in a low voice, his gaze locking onto Cooper.

Cooper gave a slight nod of agreement and moved toward him. Lady Valtorin followed silently.

"Let me check your shoulder before you leave," she said, her eyes settling on the wound Sylvester had inflicted. The fabric of Daniel's sweater near his shoulder was nearly burned away, exposing swollen, bruised skin beneath.

"I can fix it," she added, her voice calm yet firm with certainty.

Daniel shook his head. He ran his fingers over the raised skin, exhaling deeply.

"No," he said. "I want it to stay there. In Leader Glisson's memory."

"What about your nose?" Lady Valtorin asked.

"Can you fix it?"

She stepped closer and gently touched his crooked nose.

"This one's beyond saving," she said with a slight grimace.

A somber smile flickered across Daniel's lips. "Guess I'll have to find a girl who likes battle scars," he muttered.

He quickly refocused on Cooper. "Did Leader Glisson ever mention this place?"

"I don't know more than you do," Cooper replied.

Daniel lowered his voice. "Serena said they've been sending gas from here in tubes to Leader Glisson. Last week, while training Brenda, he used these tubes on her."

Cooper frowned. "I had no idea," he admitted, his voice straightforward and sincere. "Some of the gas extracted from the

mines is used in development centers, but no one would waste it on an intern who's been cast aside."

Daniel gave a slow nod. "And this place isn't exactly a known mining site either," he added. "Leader Glisson had a plan he was keeping from everyone."

Lady Valtorin, who had remained silent until then, finally spoke. "Did he make his own IVs?" she asked, curiosity gleaming in her eyes.

"No," Daniel answered firmly. "He put Brenda in a water-filled tank."

Lady Valtorin's eyes widened in shock. "He made his own giant IV."

***

After his conversation with Cooper and Lady Valtorin, Daniel returned to Serena's workspace.

"Tell me about these gangs," he said, absentmindedly poking at the fire in the center of the stone room with a stick.

Everyone who had escaped from Nivorum, along with a few cave residents, had gathered in the room to assess the situation.

Serena straightened up at the table. "It's not just failures who get exiled from Nivorum," she said. "Some are exiled for defying the rules, others simply because they became the target of someone powerful seeking revenge. To survive, they turn to raiding—stealing supplies, food… and sometimes, people."

"People?" Brenda asked, adjusting her glasses, her expression turning serious.

Ella, sitting beside Serena, couldn't hide her discomfort.

"Some are forced into labor," she said through clenched teeth. "Others… for personal entertainment…" A deep fury burned in her eyes.

Ella stood out immediately in the room—not just because of her nearly two-meter height and athletic build, but because of her sharp, defined features. Her large, jet-black eyes, arched nose, and tightly gathered hair made her striking even before she spoke. She wasn't yet thirty, but there was a hardened edge to her presence.

"We're going to help," Brenda declared, her voice unwavering. "And we're going to rescue the people they've taken."

Daniel and Olivia exchanged a glance, momentarily stunned by the confidence radiating from a girl who, just months ago, had been afraid of her own shadow.

"We don't even know where they take them," Serena pointed out. "There are hundreds of gangs scattered in small groups outside. Just keeping this place safe is enough of a struggle."

“No.” Brenda’s voice was sharp, unexpectedly loud. After being forced to endure Sylvester’s cruelty for months, she understood better than anyone what the captives must be feeling. “When they come here, we’ll find out their locations. Every single one of them.” Her eyes darkened. “And then we’ll go and save them all.”

“They’ll never give up that information,” Serena said, her tone filled with doubt.

Brenda’s brow arched, her expression hardening. Tiny sparks crackled at her fingertips.

“I know how to make them talk.”

Daniel turned to Brenda. “Are you sure about this?” he asked. But it wasn’t really a question—it was a warning. Still, when he saw the fire burning in her eyes, he chose to stay silent.

“We can do this,” Cooper said. “We just need to know how strong the ones coming here are.”

Without a word, Ella reached into her pocket and pulled out a sleek, slender pen. She pressed the button on top, and a firework no larger than a pinky finger shot out. It soared a few feet into the air, its light faint, barely visible. After a weak flicker, it burst with an unimpressive pop before vanishing.

“They aren’t stronger than this,” Ella said, her voice calm but firm.

Daniel narrowed his eyes at her. “How did you do that without a symbol?” he asked, unable to hide his curiosity.

Before Ella could respond, Cooper murmured, “Luxsophis Academy.” His gaze remained locked on the pen.

Daniel’s excitement grew tenfold. His head snapped toward Ella. “Are you from the Academy?” he asked eagerly.

Ella raised a single eyebrow. “They never used to talk about the Academy in Nivorum. Do they now?” she asked, unable to hide her surprise. The fact that both an intern and an heir knew about it caught her off guard.

“This isn’t the time,” Brenda interjected. “Our priority is saving those people.”

The young woman’s determination left no room for argument—everyone in the room silently agreed. No one objected.

Serena let out a tired sigh. “We’ll go over all the details tomorrow,” she said. “You all should get some rest.”

***

Rooms had been designated in the cave city for those who had escaped from Nivorum. The interiors were completely empty. Some walls had been carved further, creating recesses that could serve as beds and ledges that functioned as makeshift tables. Like the rest of

the underground city, the rooms were illuminated by torches fixed to the walls. Despite the stone surroundings, the air inside carried an unexpected warmth.

All the former Nivorum residents had gathered in Daniel's room.

"Are you sure you want to go after this gang?" Lady Valtorin asked. "You're taking a huge risk."

Brenda pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "I spent months being forced to amuse Sylvester," she said, her voice sharp and filled with anger. "I can't turn my back on people who are going through the same thing."

Lady Valtorin, who had long pushed aside the horrors of Sylvester's crimes and the videotape incident, lowered her head with a brief, apologetic smile. "You're right," was all she could say.

At that moment, Cooper spoke up. "More than anything, Leader Glisson was trying to protect these people," he said. "Just like he tried to protect us."

"He sacrificed himself for us," Daniel added in agreement.

Brenda nodded. "Not just for us, but for the people here too. This was his final wish."

Cooper leaned against the cave's stone wall. "I was born in Nivorum. They taught us obedience from the start. When I met him, I was fifteen or sixteen. He was nothing like anyone else in Nivorum. I almost hated him." A bittersweet smile crossed his lips as he closed his eyes. "But he showed me the truth about my own home. And now… I want to carry out his final wish."

In the flickering firelight, Olivia spoke. "When we tried to escape from Nivorum, he stood behind me," she said. "He promised that I would return home when the time was right."

All eyes turned to her.

"He made me promise," she whispered. "I couldn't tell you all."

A bitter smile formed on Brenda's lips. "I knew," she said. "When he gave me his handwritten books, I read it in his thoughts."

Lady Valtorin took a deep breath. A heavy knot sat in her throat, holding back the flood of emotions she had been suppressing for years. "His books meant everything to him," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Everything he owned… will be destroyed."

She could no longer hold it in. Every emotion she had bottled up for years spilled out as silent tears rolled down her face.

Brenda quickly stood and moved beside her. Gently, she placed a reassuring hand on Lady Valtorin's shoulder, rubbing her back in quiet comfort. She didn't know what to say, but she wanted her to feel their presence, their support.

Taking a deep breath, Brenda reached into her small bag and pulled out a worn, leather-bound book with frayed edges.

“Leader Glisson gave this to me,” she said, offering a soft smile. “Maybe it should stay with you instead.”

***

Three nights had passed since they had taken refuge in the cave. During that time, they had remained on constant alert, never knowing when the gangs would arrive.

Daniel and Brenda were in one of the empty stone rooms, trying to regain control over their fading abilities.

Daniel took another shot. The bolt from his crossbow missed its mark again. Instead of striking the wooden target, it veered off and vanished within seconds. He let out a frustrated sigh, shaking his head.

“It’s not working… I can’t do it,” he said, his voice heavy with exhaustion and discouragement.

“You can,” Brenda said softly, wrapping an arm around his. “And you will.” Then, a teasing glint appeared in her eyes. “You managed to do it when you had to save Olivia. Are you telling me you can’t do it just because I want you to?” She struggled to hold back a smile.

“I hope I can, or I’d rather not die burning inside a fireball,” Daniel replied with a small grin.

The playful expression on Brenda’s face faded instantly. Her smile vanished.

Daniel tensed the moment he realized what he had just said.

“Brenda… I… I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring that up,” he said, his voice filled with regret.

“I know,” Brenda whispered. She forced a small smile, but her eyes were beginning to well up.

“Brenda…” Daniel exhaled, guilt tightening in his chest. Without thinking, he pulled her closer, wrapping his arms around her. His fingers traced a soft path along her cheek.

Their eyes locked.

Neither of them moved, barely even breathing.

Slowly, Daniel leaned in, bringing his face closer to hers. The distance between them shrank. Brenda’s eyes fluttered shut. She let herself go, surrendering to the one person in this world she trusted the most.

Their lips were only a breath apart when—

“They’re coming!”

Olivia’s voice cut through the moment like a blade.

Both of them jolted apart.

Olivia had poked her head through the door, staring at them for a few seconds. Deciding it wasn’t the right time to tease them, she

simply said, “There are five people. Be careful.” Then she disappeared back into the depths of the cave.

“We need to get downstairs,” Daniel said.

He grabbed the miner’s outfit waiting by the door. Brenda followed suit, quickly picking up her own set, and together, they sprinted down the stone steps.

The lower levels of the cave, used as a gas mine, were bustling with activity. Some workers monitored the gauges on the panels, others carried portable drilling equipment, while a few were assembling machinery. Yet, despite the movement, one expression was carved onto every face—exhaustion and despair.

As soon as they reached the lower level, Daniel and Brenda quickly found a discreet corner and changed. Instead of their Nivorum clothing, they now wore old, dirty, and tattered garments. It was enough to blend in, making them indistinguishable from the other miners.

They took their preassigned positions, keeping about twenty meters of distance between them. Daniel grabbed a stack of supplies piled on the crates, while Brenda busied herself with tightening the bolts on a set of pipes. Within moments, they had faded into the background, just two more nameless workers in the crowd.

Barely half a minute had passed when Serena and Ella appeared at the cave’s entrance.

Right behind them were four masked strangers.

Each of them wore black hooded cloaks, embroidered with gold patterns that stretched from their hoods down to the hems, gleaming even in the dim light. Their faces were completely hidden behind masks, revealing only their eyes.

“Double the amount this time, Serena,” one of the men said, his voice cold and self-assured.

Serena immediately turned to face him. She knew chaos was about to erupt, but she couldn’t hold back.

“That’s impossible,” she snapped, her voice thick with anger. “If we extract twice the amount, Nivorum will notice us.”

A low, guttural laugh echoed through the cave.

“Nivorum isn’t in any condition to notice a shortfall in the gas mines right now.”

“You can’t be sure of that,” she shot back, her voice rising a notch.

Ella swiftly grabbed her arm. “Calm down.”

The man let out another laugh, this time with open mockery.

“You should listen to this big girl. Your lover is just looking out for you.”

“Fine,” Ella interjected, not wanting to escalate things further. “You’ll get what you came for.”

Roy lifted his head, his gaze dark with unspoken threats.

"Oh, we will. Neither of us wants me to start using my abilities in here, do we?"

Without waiting for a response, he turned and began walking deeper into the cave, heading toward the panels—but suddenly, he stopped. His eyes landed on Brenda, who was calmly working among the other miners.

"Well, well…" he murmured. "I'm certain I haven't seen you around here before."

Slowly, he turned his masked face toward Serena.

"I didn't know you had new workers."

Brenda subtly locked eyes with Daniel. Even with the distance between them, she could feel the anger and protective instinct radiating from him. Raising her eyebrows slightly, she gave him a look that clearly said, Don't. If they acted now, their plan would fall apart. Their priority was to find out where this gang was hiding.

Roy ignored the panels and turned toward Brenda instead.

"Looks like we'll be taking more than just the gas," he said, glancing back at his men with a smirk.

With that, he reached for her waist.

The moment Brenda saw his hand moving toward her, her eyes widened. It only took seconds to understand what was going through his mind—he was no different from Sylvester. A deep, simmering hatred boiled to the surface. After everything she had endured, facing that same vile mindset again snapped something inside her.

Before his fingers could even brush against her, she spun around and caught his wrist midair. Heat surged into her palm, spreading rapidly through her grip. Narrowing her eyes, she hissed, "Don't you dare touch me."

Her gaze locked onto his, unwavering and deadly.

Roy's agonized scream echoed through the cave.

A searing pain shot from his wrist up to his shoulder, as if his entire arm had been plunged into an open flame.

Smoke curled from the sleeve of his cloak, right where Brenda's hand held him. The fabric charred and crumbled into ash, its remnants fluttering to the ground.

Two men rushed toward them. Both reached for their symbols at the same time—one raised his hand, and in an instant, it morphed into a glowing feline claw. The other summoned a baseball bat into his palm.

Daniel swiftly summoned his crossbow from the wristband hidden beneath his clothes and fired. The bolt missed its mark, striking a pipe before vanishing into thin air.

The gang members froze simultaneously. They hadn't expected

anyone in the cave to be armed. Their eyes darted to Daniel, who was already aiming at them again.

A tense moment of hesitation passed before both quickly dropped their weapons and took a few cautious steps back.

Brenda shoved Roy's arm forcefully. He let out a pained cry as he collapsed to the ground, writhing in agony. A burn the size of a palm had seared into his wrist, the raw skin glowing red like scorched meat. The moment his eyes landed on the wound, his screams grew louder.

"Shut up," Daniel said as he approached. His gaze flickered to Brenda. "Are you okay?"

"I've never been better," she replied, a strange smile curling her lips. Watching the man suffer filled her with both pride and an odd sense of satisfaction. He had received exactly what he deserved.

Just then, a foreign voice echoed through the cave.

"Drop your symbols. Now!"

Daniel and Brenda spun toward the voice. Two cloaked men stood directly behind Serena and Ella, pressing cold steel knifes against their throats.

Without thinking, Daniel raised his crossbow. At the same time, red sparks crackled to life at Brenda's fingertips.

"One more reckless move, and your friends die. Your symbols. Now!"

The two men who had retreated after Daniel's earlier shot cautiously stepped forward again, their eyes sharp, tracking even the slightest movement.

Daniel didn't waver. His crossbow remained steady, the loaded bolt glowing brighter by the second.

"Kill them, Daniel," Serena said, showing not the slightest trace of fear. Her voice was so calm, so casual—it was as if she were discussing something trivial on an ordinary day.

Ella swallowed hard, feeling the icy pressure of the knife against her throat. She stared at Serena in astonishment, unable to comprehend her fearlessness. Nevertheless, she felt utterly powerless under the threat of the man behind her.

"Do what they say. I beg you," she whispered, her voice trembling. Tears welled in her eyes and began to spill down her cheeks. She looked up at Daniel, desperation in her expression.

"Please don't hurt us," she whimpered.

For a brief moment, Daniel hesitated.

Leader Glisson had sacrificed himself to protect them. He had given everything for Serena and her people. Daniel couldn't bring himself to sacrifice these people, nor could he disrespect Glisson's efforts.

And worst of all—he wasn't confident in his aim. The risk of

hitting Serena or Ella was too high. He couldn't take that chance.

With a heavy exhale, he dropped his crossbow. The weapon vanished the moment it hit the ground. Then, he removed his wristband and held it out.

Brenda followed suit. The moment she slipped off her ring, the flickering sparks at her fingertips died out.

Now, they were both completely defenseless. One could see in the dark, the other could read minds—but against the gang, they had lost all their real power.

The two men who had attempted to attack Brenda earlier snatched up their symbols and quickly rearmed themselves. Meanwhile, the men restraining Serena and Ella finally lowered their knives. The immediate threat was gone.

The two women immediately embraced. Serena wiped the tears from Ella's cheeks. "Don't be afraid. It's over now."

Ella took a shaky breath.

"Okay," was all she managed to say.

One of the cloaked men approached Roy. Placing his knife on the ground, he pulled a glass vial from his pocket and poured its contents over the burn.

As the compressed stardust settled onto Roy's scorched skin, his pained expression eased. The pain rapidly subsided. As the wound scabbed over and healed, he pushed himself to his feet. Only a dull ache remained. His narrowed, rage-filled eyes locked onto Brenda.

He took slow, deliberate steps toward her, his presence radiating pure malice.

"I'm going to kill you, little whore!" he snarled.

Daniel instinctively stepped forward, every muscle in his body tightening. His pulse pounded in his ears, but an overwhelming fear gripped him—he had no idea what Roy was capable of, and that uncertainty gnawed at him.

"So, you want to play the hero?" Roy sneered, letting out a cruel laugh. The moment the words left his mouth, his fist swung forward. "Your vulture's wings won't protect you anymore."

The punch landed hard against Daniel's face, sending him stumbling backward. The impact threw him off balance, dizziness clouding his vision. His legs nearly gave out beneath him as he struggled to steady himself. The pain radiating from his nose was sharp and throbbing—Sylvester had broken it before, and now it was flaring up again. It wasn't as severe this time, but it was enough to sting.

But that wasn't the real problem.

Roy was right.

Without his symbol, he was as weak as he had been months ago.

He couldn't protect himself.

Worse—he couldn't protect Brenda.

His eyes stung, not from the pain in his nose, but from the crushing realization that he was powerless to stop what was happening.

Roy grabbed Brenda's arm roughly. "Let's see if you're still this defiant in your new home," he growled before yanking her toward the cave's exit.

The other two gang members stepped aside, clearing a path for him.

"Twice the usual amount. We'll be back," Roy said, shooting a glare at Serena. Then his lips curled into a smug grin. "Oh, and I'm taking this one with me."

Brenda acted fast, slipping into Serena and Ella's minds for a fleeting second. She found no resistance—no one had the courage to intervene. Even Daniel knew there was nothing he could do.

As Roy dragged her forward, they stepped through the cavern's rocky passage.

From behind a boulder, Cooper lay in wait, his shield activated and at the ready. The moment he heard Roy's approaching footsteps, he lunged.

With a burst of speed, he swung his glowing blue shield straight at Roy's face.

Brenda, seeing the light streak toward them, swiftly ducked to the side, breaking free from Roy's grip.

The last thing Roy saw was the bright blue light striking him square on the face. The force of the impact sent his world spiraling into darkness. His eyes rolled back, and he collapsed unconscious to the ground.

Hearing the commotion, the remaining gang members sprinted toward the source of the noise.

The moment they passed through the narrow passage, they found themselves face-to-face with a crimson-glowing sword.

Panic surged through them as they instinctively tried to retreat—only to realize their escape route had already been sealed.

Behind them stood Lady Valtorin, her fingers gleaming with syringes summoned from her symbol..

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"I warned you they were five," Olivia shouted. She paced back and forth in Serena's room, her steps quick and agitated. Her face was tense with anger, brows furrowed, as she shot sharp glances at Daniel and Brenda, who sat across from her.

"Calm down, Olivia. Nothing happened," Daniel said.

The response did nothing but fuel Olivia's anger even more. "But it could have!" she snapped. "Did either of you even consider that you could have died?"

Brenda smiled slightly. "You're right, Olivia. We should have been more careful." For a brief moment, she considered slipping into Olivia's mind, but she had promised before that she wouldn't. Besides, she knew the real reason Olivia was this angry—it wasn't just frustration. It was fear.

"I said they were five. Five!" Olivia repeated through clenched teeth.

Daniel sighed. "It was my fault," he admitted, guilt weighing in his voice. "When Serena and Ella arrived with three people, I got confused."

Olivia tried to suppress her frustration. Seeing her friends sitting there unharmed was a relief, but she didn't want to show it. "Be more careful next time."

At that moment, Serena walked in. "We locked the gang members in the rooms. Timothy is interrogating them, trying to find out where they live."

"I'm going too," Brenda said, getting to her feet. She turned to Olivia with a warm smile. "That is, if we're done being scolded."

"Go and take every thought out of that man's mind," Olivia said with a firm expression.

As soon as Brenda left the room, Olivia turned to Daniel. "Why are you still sitting? Don't leave her alone. We don't know what she's going to do. She's been too aggressive lately."

Daniel nodded and quickly got up. "You're right," he said, hurrying toward the door.

He caught up with Brenda in just a few steps on the narrow stairs of the cave. Leaning slightly toward her, he asked, "I assume you don't mind me tagging along?"

Brenda smiled. "I suppose not," she replied softly. "Did she send you as my babysitter?"

Daniel raised an eyebrow. "Can't you resist reading my mind for even a second?"

Tilting her head with a playful smirk, Brenda replied, "I'll need it soon, just getting some practice."

"Fair enough," Daniel said.

After descending a few levels, they reached the room where Roy was being held.

Without a word, Daniel stormed inside. He walked straight over to Roy, who was tightly bound to a chair, and threw a punch without hesitation.

The blow sent Roy's head snapping to the side, knocking him over

along with the chair. A small groan escaped his lips, but it didn't last long. Compared to his own hits, Daniel's punch felt like nothing more than a mosquito bite.

Roy lifted his head slightly and flashed a mocking grin.

"No, I don't need to be a hero, you idiot," Daniel hissed, his voice laced with anger. "This girl is strong enough on her own—she doesn't need anyone playing hero for her!"

Timothy Cooper burst into the room. With a swift movement, he grabbed Daniel's arm and pulled him back.

"Calm down," he said firmly. "We need him."

Daniel clenched his jaw but didn't resist. Taking a deep breath, he crouched down and leaned against the wall, forcing himself to rein in his anger. With Cooper's help, Roy was lifted back up along with his chair. His eyes met Brenda's—her honey-colored gaze crackling with an intensity that sent a shiver down his spine. A moment ago, when Daniel came at him, he hadn't been afraid. But Brenda's stare… there was something in those eyes that wasn't going to show him any mercy.

Brenda kept staring in silence. She could see Roy's fear laid bare before her. His connection to the stardust had weakened so much that his mind was completely open. She could move through it freely.

"There's no need to be so scared," she said, her voice calm but laced with quiet menace. "I just need a little information, that's all."

"I'll never tell you anything." Roy pressed his lips together. "But when I get out of here, you'll be begging to come with me, rebel girl." Every word was an effort to hold himself together, but the rhythm of his heartbeat and the sweat forming on his forehead betrayed him.

"So, you want to take me to where you live that badly?" Brenda murmured, a smirk playing on her lips. "Do you have a nice room?"

For a split second, Roy's face flickered with confusion. He froze, unable to find a response.

Brenda fixed her gaze on him and continued without hesitation. "So, is your room in a house, or is it in a cave like this? How many of you live there? Is it far from here? Which direction do we need to go? Can we reach it on foot? Is your boss there too? Where do you store the supplies you take from here? What do you use them for? Are the prisoners kept in one place, or have you enslaved them? Do you torture them? Have you ever forced them into being with you?"

With each question, Brenda's voice grew sharper. Her eyes widened, her jaw tightened, and her teeth clenched together. "And what about you? While doing all this, did you ever stop to think that they were human too?"

Roy was crumbling under the relentless barrage. He had no idea what to say.

Brenda had no intention of stopping. “They prayed for your death every night, didn’t they?” Her voice had dropped to a terrifying whisper. In a swift motion, she reached out and gripped Roy’s throat tightly. Smoke began to rise from her palm.

The moment Roy felt the familiar pain, he screamed in agony. His eyes went wide with terror, his body trembling violently despite being bound to the chair.

Daniel and Cooper lunged forward to stop her, but Brenda raised her other hand toward them and shouted fiercely, “Don’t! Don’t come any closer!”

The hand clutching Roy’s throat glowed red, like molten lava. Heat pulsed beneath her veins, seeping through her skin like fire.

Roy’s screams suddenly cut off. His breath was gone. His eyes remained open, but they were empty. Lifeless. His body, still tied to the chair, was smoldering from within.

When Brenda finally pulled her hand away, Roy’s throat was charred black, his skin cracked and scorched.

She cast one last glance at him before turning on her heel.

“Right where he belongs,” she said, then walked out of the room.

***

Half an hour later, Daniel quietly approached Brenda’s door. He hesitated before leaning in and peeking inside.

“Can I come in?” he asked softly. The uncertainty in his voice was clear.

Brenda lifted her head slightly. “Why are you even asking?”

Daniel stepped inside slowly. “What happened today…”

Brenda gave him a sad look. “Are you afraid of me?” she asked. Her eyes were already welling up.

“No,” Daniel said immediately—but his voice betrayed him. No matter how desperately he tried to lie, he knew it wouldn’t work.

Brenda sighed. “No matter what happens, please don’t lie to me, Daniel. I can already see it.”

Daniel let out a slow breath. “Are you in my head again?” he asked, trying to lighten the mood.

Brenda smiled slightly, but a single tear slipped down her cheek. “He didn’t deserve to live, Daniel. I saw what he did to those women.”

Daniel averted his gaze. “I know, but… Brenda, this isn’t you. You can’t become a killer.”

Her expression hardened instantly. “I am not a killer.” Her voice trembled, like someone struggling to contain their anger. “Just like you weren’t a killer when you killed that man in Gardenville.”

Slowly, she stepped closer and gently took his hand.

Daniel lowered his eyes, staring at Brenda's hands. These were the same hands that had burned Roy's throat to ashes with scorching fire —yet now, the warmth they carried felt sweet and gentle.

"I only gave him the punishment he deserved, Daniel," she said, locking eyes with him. "No one here was going to arrest him or put him on trial. He had to pay for the suffering he caused."

"Yes, but—"

Brenda didn't let him finish. "When you first heard what Sylvester did to me, I know you tried to go after him—to kill him."

Daniel tilted his head slightly, a small smirk playing on his lips. "You've been inside Olivia's mind too, haven't you?" he murmured.

Brenda rolled her eyes with a chuckle. "No, you dummy. I only did that once. She might've mentioned it during one of our girl talks."

Then, her gaze turned serious again. "I don't regret what I did, Daniel. If you're going to be afraid of me because of this and never try to kiss me again… I'll understand."

Without a second of hesitation, Daniel leaned in and pressed a soft, tender kiss to her lips.

CHAPTER XV

RAID

Brenda lay alone in the room that had been assigned to her. Only a few hours had passed since she had interrogated Roy.

While everyone else had gathered in Serena's room to discuss what to do about the remaining gang members, she had excused herself, claiming she wasn't feeling well. In truth, her mind was occupied with an entirely different plan.

Using the information she had pulled from Roy's mind, she planned to rescue the people the gang had kidnapped. Silently, she sat up and slipped out of her room.

But the moment she stepped into the corridor, she froze. Standing there, waiting for her, was Daniel.

"If you're ready, let's go," he said, as if he had known exactly what she was going to do from the start.

Brenda hesitated. She had wanted to handle this alone.

"What are you waiting for?" Daniel asked, raising an eyebrow. "I may not be able to read your mind, but I can see the fire of revenge in your eyes. If you're going to do this, let's do it together."

Brenda sighed softly. "Daniel… It's better if you don't come. You know that."

Daniel furrowed his brows, trying to look irritated, but the smile tugging at his lips betrayed him. "Are you calling me useless? I only missed a few shots."

Brenda let out a weary sigh. "You're impossible." Knowing he wouldn't back down, she didn't bother arguing. "Fine. We go together. But we do this fast and quiet."

They moved swiftly through the corridors and down the staircases, heading toward the cave's outer passage. Just as they reached the exit, a dark silhouette stood waiting for them. The figure turned slowly upon hearing their approach.

"I was expecting you," Cooper said, crossing his arms. "We need to leave before sunset."

Brenda hesitated immediately. "Cooper, we…" She wasn't sure how to tell him he wasn't supposed to come.

Cooper narrowed his eyes. "Technically, you're still on Nivorum territory. Which means, as an intern, you're under my authority. So, I'm coming too."

Brenda took a deep breath. "Daniel is an heir too. I'm going with

him."

Cooper smirked. "Alright. So, as heirs, we're deciding that I'll be joining as well. Isn't that right, Heir Milner?"

Daniel quickly responded, "Yes. It'd be good to have Heir Cooper with us." In truth, he wanted Cooper to come—he wasn't entirely confident in his own aim, nor was he certain Brenda should be facing this alone.

Brenda scowled. "If you two are done playing commanders, can we go now?"

Cooper raised his eyebrows and gestured behind them. "We have one more passenger."

Daniel and Brenda turned at the same time.

Leaning against the wall, arms crossed, listening to their entire conversation, was Olivia.

Their eyes met.

"Are the lovebirds going for a stroll?" Olivia asked, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "You'd think knowing when someone is approaching from behind would be useful."

Brenda shook her head, exasperated. "Anyone else joining? Should we ask Nivorum to send a bus?"

"I doubt they'd give us one," Cooper said with a slight chuckle.

***

After leaving the cave, they moved forward under Brenda's lead.

The air was harsher and colder than anything they were used to in Nivorum. Heavy snowfall blanketed the paths, covering their entire field of vision in white. They had no idea how long they had been walking.

"How has it been snowing since August?" Olivia asked, glancing at Cooper, who walked beside her. Since he had spent his whole life in Nivorum, she assumed he might know the answer.

"It's always winter here," Cooper replied. "The seasons never change."

Olivia turned to him in surprise. "Why?"

"I don't know," Cooper admitted.

Daniel, who had been listening in from just behind them, spoke up. "The place where the Academy is wasn't like this."

Cooper nodded. "The Academy is in a different fragment. Each fragment has its own unique climate and environment." He noticed the confused looks on Olivia and Daniel's faces and hesitated before adding, "You can think of them like different planets."

Olivia sighed as the wind slashed against her face like a sharp blade. "Alright, does anyone have a way to keep us from freezing in

this fragment?" she asked, trying to warm her hands with her breath.

Brenda slowed her pace and stepped up beside Olivia. "Give me your hand," she said gently, already reaching out her own.

Olivia smiled slightly and took the girl's hand. "I think the cold's getting to you. You've mistaken me for Daniel," she teased.

But the moment their hands touched, a soothing warmth spread through her body. The heat from Brenda's palm seeped into her, relaxing her muscles and dulling the biting chill. A peaceful comfort settled over her.

"Thank you," she whispered, savoring the warmth.

***

Throughout the journey, Brenda did everything she could to keep both Olivia and Daniel warm. The only one completely unfazed by the freezing air was Cooper—he had spent years in this cold and was well accustomed to it.

"We're here," Brenda said, pointing toward a tall-walled house in the distance.

The three-story building, surrounded by solid walls on all sides, looked very warm. With its white-painted exterior and blue wooden shutters, it had the appearance of a vacation home. But they knew exactly who was inside.

"There are eight people in there," Brenda said. "It would be good to know which rooms they're in." Then she turned to Olivia. "Can you sense where they are?"

Olivia shook her head. "Not from here. But if we get close to the walls, I'll be able to."

Cooper studied the house, letting out a quiet sigh. "Oscar's speed would have been useful," he murmured, his voice tinged with sadness. Then, lifting his head, he added, "Olivia and I will go ahead, right up to the walls. Once we've located everyone, I'll signal you."

No one objected. After a quick nod of agreement, Cooper and Olivia moved forward, using the trees and thick snow as cover.

Left alone with Brenda, Daniel turned to her quietly. "What's on your mind?" He wasn't sure what kind of approach she planned to take with the gang members inside.

Brenda reached out, her warm fingers brushing lightly against his cheek. "They'll get what they deserve," she said, her voice unwavering.

Daniel had expected that answer. Tilting his head slightly, he leaned into her touch. "No matter what you do in there, nothing will change how I see you," he said reassuringly. "But don't let what you do change you."

Brenda's lips curled into a faint smile. "Don't worry. I wouldn't want to look different in the eyes of the person who gave me my first kiss."

But just as the smile touched her lips, it faded. Her gaze turned distant. "Actually… my first kiss…" she whispered, her voice breaking for a moment.

Daniel gently placed a finger against her lips, stopping her. "Promise the person who gave you your first kiss—you won't change."

Brenda locked eyes with him. "I won't change."

At that moment, a faint blue glow flickered near the wall, catching their attention. Cooper had summoned his familiar shield and handed it to Olivia. It was their signal to move forward.

Daniel and Brenda carefully made their way through the trees, maneuvering around bushes buried in snow and scattered rocks, until they reached Cooper and Olivia by the wall.

"I'm sensing the strongest dark energy from the top floor," Olivia said, closing her eyes. "The corner room with the balcony. Four of them are on the floor below. One is on the ground floor. I can't sense the other two."

Brenda frowned. "What about the captives?"

Olivia took a deep breath. "I can't sense"

Brenda stepped back and faced the others. "We need to be extremely careful. We need to find out where the captives are. We must get them out of here." she said, her voice firm. "The gang's leader is powerful. The others aren't any different from the ones in the cave."

Cooper pulled up his mask. The vulture symbol glowed red as a long sword materialized in his hand. "I'll take the top floor," he said with determination.

"No," Brenda objected. "I'm going up there. You need to protect Olivia. She doesn't have a weapon to defend herself."

Cooper narrowed his eyes. "Are you sure? I've done this dozens of times before."

Brenda locked eyes with him. "I'm sure. I want to face this gang's leader myself." There wasn't even the slightest hesitation in her voice.

Daniel took a deep breath and touched his wristband. His crossbow materialized in his hands. "I'll go with her. If she wants to face someone like that in person…"

Cooper thought for a moment, then nodded. "Alright. We'll focus on the ones downstairs."

***

Daniel and Brenda circled around the walls and reached the small

wooden door. Silently, they pushed it open and slipped into the garden.

Brenda pointed to the stone staircase leading up to the second-floor balcony, careful not to make even the slightest noise.

For Daniel, communicating was much easier. All he had to do was think about going ahead to check inside, and she immediately picked up on it. She gave him a small nod of approval.

They moved cautiously to the base of the stairs. Daniel crouched low on the stone steps and carefully climbed up, his crossbow ready in his hands. He peered through the shutters. The room was empty.

Brenda, who had been inside his mind, learned this almost at the same moment. She quietly ascended the stairs.

Just as he reached for the door, she grabbed his hand and stopped him. Closing her eyes, she concentrated for a few seconds. Sparks flickered at her fingertips, rapidly growing into deep red flames that engulfed her hands. Then, she gave him a small nod, signaling for him to open the door.

Daniel pressed down on the handle and pushed. A dull clank of metal echoed. The door didn't budge. His second attempt had the same result.

Brenda raised a hand, signaling him to stop. The sound could've alerted whoever was inside.

He withdrew his hand as she gripped the handle firmly. The metal began to melt rapidly, the heat spreading to the inner mechanisms of the door, turning the lock into liquid. With a light push of her shoe, she slipped inside.

Daniel followed close behind. Moving swiftly past her, he headed straight for the door leading to the corridor. He lifted his crossbow and aimed down the dark hallway. No one was in sight, but light seeped from beneath a door at the end of the corridor, revealing that someone was inside.

"I found them," he thought, approaching the door.

Brenda, having received the thought, followed. Her hands still shimmered with heat, casting flickering light on the walls. When their eyes met, she motioned for him to continue while she moved toward the stairs leading to the upper floor.

"Alright," he responded in his mind. "I'll be with you in a few minutes."

As Brenda carefully climbed the stairs, Daniel advanced toward the door with the glowing slit of light beneath it. Pressing his back to the frame, he peeked through the slight opening.

Inside, three men were present. Two sat at a table in the middle of the room, while the third lounged on a couch. But the fourth man—who was supposed to be here—was nowhere to be seen. Still, there

was no time to waste.

He swiftly raised his crossbow and burst into the room.

“Anyone makes a sound, they die,” he said in a low, menacing voice. “You. On the couch. Tie your friends to the chairs.”

None of them had ever considered that someone else could enter this place, and they had made no preparations for such a possibility.

“There’s no rope to tie them with,” the man on the couch whispered, still unable to shake off his shock.

Daniel stared at him without blinking. His crossbow began to glow even brighter, fueled by his rising irritation.

The man swallowed hard when he saw the look on Daniel’s face. “Alright, calm down,” he said, raising his hands as he slowly stood. He bent down next to the couch.

Daniel instinctively aimed his crossbow, ready to fire at any moment. But he prayed he wouldn’t have to. He wasn’t sure if he’d even hit his target. His hands started sweating. For the first time, he felt this tense while holding his crossbow. His heartbeat pounded in his ears.

The man straightened, holding a bright chain in his hands.

Daniel tried to read his intentions. Was he going to use it as a weapon, or was he really about to tie up his friends? He couldn’t tell. He locked eyes with him, trying to decide.

For the first time in a long while, time seemed to slow down.

His index finger twitched slightly on the trigger. He thought about what they were doing here. He was certain—without a shred of doubt—that Brenda wouldn’t leave a single one of these gang members alive. Even if this man tied his friends to the chairs, he wouldn’t escape his fate.

But what would she feel afterward? What if, one day, she regretted it the way he had? Would she be able to live with that?

I can do it instead, he told himself.

Before his brain could even send the signal to his finger, his shimmering arrow had already been released.

A deep scream rang out. The man collapsed to the ground, the arrow piercing through his skull flaring into a brilliant beam of light before disappearing.

The two men at the table widened their eyes. Frozen in place, they sat there, too stunned to react.

The moment the man with the chains cried out, chaos erupted from the lower floor—screams, rushing footsteps, doors and windows slamming shut with force. But the upper floor remained silent.

Daniel quickly reloaded his crossbow, aimed at the man sitting on the far side of the table, and fired again. The second gang member slumped forward onto the table.

Just then, the third man sprang up and lunged at him, throwing a punch straight at his face.

Over the past two months, Daniel had gained plenty of experience in getting punched. He managed to dodge at the last second, his head snapping to the side just in time. With swift reflexes, he swung his crossbow, smashing it into the man's face.

The impact sent him staggering backward. He clutched his face and groaned in pain. It took him a few seconds to recover and open his eyes.

ut the first—and last—thing he saw was a glowing wave of light shooting straight between his eyes.

With all three men down, Daniel turned to leave and head toward Brenda. He stepped into the corridor—only to lock eyes with the fourth man, the one he had completely forgotten about, standing just a few meters away.

This time, it was Daniel who froze. His gaze dropped to the gun in the man's hand. No glow, no light. A real firearm—the kind he had seen thousands of times in his father's house. One that fired real bullets.

"Drop your weapon and take off your symbol," the man ordered, aiming the barrel straight at him.

"Alright," Daniel said, keeping his voice as calm as possible. He spread his hands, letting his crossbow fall to the ground and disappear. Slowly, he raised his arm. "Relax, my symbol is on my wristband," he said, tilting his wrist toward him.

"Take it off!" the man barked, his voice rising.

Daniel's hand inched toward his wristband. But the moment he touched it, an unfamiliar sensation washed over him.

A strange hum echoed in his ears, growing louder with each passing second. Indistinct whispers vibrated through his eardrums.

The chaotic murmurs intensified the instant his fingers brushed the clasp.

Th… g…, t… gu… i… e…y, the g… is em…y.

He focused, trying to make sense of the sound. As the muffled noise sharpened, he first recognized the voice—then understood the words.

"The gun is empty," Lando Glisson's voice echoed in his mind.

At that moment, all the humming and pressure vanished from his ears.

"Hurry up!" the man shouted impatiently, irritated by Daniel's hesitation.

He shook his head slightly. His symbol flickered, and his crossbow was summoned back into his hand. Raising his weapon, he smirked. "I imagine bullets are hard to come by around here."

The man, panicked by the unexpected move, pulled the trigger. The bullet whizzed past Daniel and lodged into the window behind him. But before he could fire a second shot, a glowing arrow struck him dead, sending him collapsing to the floor.

Daniel hesitated for a moment, trying to process what had just happened. Only seconds ago, if he had been standing just a step to the right, he would have been dead. He thought about Leader Glisson's voice, trying to understand why he had heard it.

But before he could dwell on it further, the commotion from downstairs started to fade, making the sounds from the upper floor much clearer.

Brenda's furious shouts echoed through the entire building.

Daniel rushed up the stairs two or three at a time. But just as he reached the top, a wall of fire blocked his path. The upper floor was engulfed in flames.

"Brenda!" he yelled, trying to push forward, but the heat was too intense. It was impossible to get any closer. Far beyond what he could withstand.

"Brenda, are you okay?" he shouted again.

The fire crept toward the staircase, thick smoke quickly making it harder to breathe. Without wasting another second, he turned back down the stairs. "Olivia, Cooper… I need your help!"

When he reached the ground floor, dozens of people were sprinting toward the main entrance, stumbling into the cold night. Some had their clothes torn to shreds, while others were completely naked. Most were women, but there were also men and children among them. They all shared the same traits—filthy skin, bodies covered in scars.

Daniel spotted Olivia and Cooper at the back of the group, guiding them out. He ran to them, breathless.

"Brenda!" he gasped. "She's still up there. The whole place is burning!"

All three of them bolted toward the staircase.

They had barely made it up one floor when thick black smoke swallowed their path, making it impossible to go any further.

Daniel's vision dropped to zero. Even from here, the scorching heat was unbearable.

"We can't go up," Cooper said. "We need to get out."

Daniel lunged toward the smoke. "We have to get her out!" he shouted, but his lungs filled with more toxic fumes than oxygen. His eyes burned, and a violent coughing fit overtook him.

"Grab his arm," Cooper said.

Together, he and Olivia pulled him back, dragging him down the stairs and out of the burning house.

Some of the freed captives stood just outside, watching the place

that had once been their prison go up in flames. Others had already vanished, chasing their long-lost freedom.

A faint, agonized scream rang out from inside.

The fire had reached the ground floor. The upper levels were nearly consumed.

“We should move back,” Cooper said, his voice trembling.

Tears streamed down Olivia’s face as she silently watched the fire spread.

Daniel, meanwhile, had collapsed onto the melting snow, staring blankly at nothing.

“I couldn’t get her out… I couldn’t save her…” he mumbled.

A final scream from the upper floor was suddenly cut short.

Then… the entire level was swallowed by flames.

The roof groaned and, slowly, began to collapse.

Daniel stared up at the third floor, still in shock. His voice was hollow as he asked, “Is she dead?”

Cooper crouched beside him in silence, placing a hand on his shoulder. Gently, he tried to turn Daniel’s head away from the burning wreckage. “I’m sorry, Daniel… I’m so sorry.”

“She’s coming!” Olivia suddenly shouted.

She had felt a powerful energy ripple from inside the flames. Her tears blurred her vision, but she could still make out the burning building, barely visible through the haze.

Even a few of the freed captives stood frozen, breathless, staring at the fire, waiting to see if someone would emerge.

Daniel and Cooper’s eyes snapped toward the inferno. They couldn’t even see where the doorway had been—just a rough estimate of where it should be.

Then, as if parting a curtain, Brenda pushed through the flames and stepped outside.

There wasn’t a single burn on her body. Not even a scratch on her clothes. No smudges of soot on her face. It was as if she hadn’t walked through a blazing inferno, but rather had simply stepped through a doorway into Nivorum Square.

Daniel shot to his feet and rushed toward Olivia. The moment he threw his arms around her, he abruptly flinched and stumbled back.

“You’re burning hot!” he shouted.

***

Only the four of them remained within the garden walls. For a long time, they sat in silence, watching the house burn. The building collapsed in on itself, turning to ash before their eyes.

The same questions lingered in everyone’s minds. They wondered

what the others had faced inside—but most of all, what Brenda had done. Yet no one dared to ask. They were all waiting for her to speak first.

Brenda finally broke the silence. Even though she hadn't entered Cooper or Olivia's minds, she still knew exactly what Daniel was thinking.

"The man upstairs was the leader of the gang," she said. "One more piece of filth erased from the world. If we can still call this place Earth…"

Olivia hesitated before asking, "We heard him scream. Did you…?"

Brenda kept her eyes fixed on the fire as she answered in a cold, steady voice. "Yes, I burned him."

A brief silence followed. The crackling flames filled the air.

"I don't know if there's a God or a hell," Brenda added. "But if there isn't… I didn't want him to just disappear without paying for what he did."

The group fell quiet once more. They were all shocked by how calm she was after killing both Roy and the gang leader.

"Did you get everyone out?" she asked, breaking the silence again.

There was no one left in sight—the last of the captives had already vanished into the distance.

"Yes," Cooper replied. "They all ran in a panic. I just hope they find the cave."

"Their clothes won't protect them from this cold," Olivia sighed. Some of them had been wearing nothing at all.

Concern spread across Brenda's face. "We have to go after them! Maybe we can find them."

Cooper shook his head. "They scattered in every direction. We don't stand a chance. If we come across any on our way, we can help them."

Brenda's voice was firm. "Then we search for them."

This time, Cooper's tone became more authoritative. "Which ones? No matter which way we go, we won't reach the others. And we could lose our own way in the process. You did what you had to do, Brenda."

"I sent them to their deaths," she shouted.

She yanked off her goggles, pressing her thumbs against her eyes, trying to stop the tears from falling.

Olivia gently rubbed her arm. "They were already dying, Brenda…" she whispered. "Most of them were covered in scars. And some… some were already…"

She didn't finish her sentence. There was no need. They all understood what she meant.

Daniel remained silent. He knew—however indirectly—that what

he had feared had come true. He had killed the men on the middle floor so that Brenda wouldn't regret it later. But he had never once considered that she would feel guilt over the captives they couldn't save.

"We need to leave before nightfall. We have to get back to the cave," Cooper said. "If we see anyone along the way, we'll take them with us."

***

On the way back, neither Brenda offered to keep her friends warm, nor did Daniel and Olivia ask her to. They found it ethically troubling, and more than that, they weren't sure how she would react.

Daniel quietly approached Cooper. "Is it possible to speak with someone who's dead?" he asked in a hushed voice.

Cooper turned to him with a surprised look, not understanding why he was asking. "Partially," he said, though he didn't sound certain. "Sylvester spoke to a dead body in Gardenville."

Daniel nodded. "But the corpse was still there. What I mean is… speaking to someone who has already died."

Cooper thought for a moment. "I've never seen anything like that happen in Nivorum. Maybe at the Academy."

"The Academy…" Daniel murmured. "I want to go there."

Cooper lowered his voice to a whisper. "The Academy doesn't accept any ore it hasn't refined from day one," he said, dimming Daniel's hopes. But then, as if trying to encourage him, he nudged his shoulder. "The day they restored your memory, Hunt requested you for the Academy, Daniel. Looks like you're… a rather valuable ore."

Daniel's eyes lit up with excitement. "Then how do I get there?"

"There's no direct way to reach the Academy."

"Then how did you contact Hunt that day?"

"Leader Glisson and Oscar had a friendship with Hunt. They were using a parchment to reach him."

Daniel's mind worked fast. "If we find those parchments…"

"You won't find them," Cooper interrupted. "While he was taking you all out of Nivorum, I was destroying all of his belongings."

Daniel suddenly snapped. "Why?!" he shouted, like a child whose favorite toy had just been taken away.

Olivia and Brenda exchanged surprised glances, now silently listening in, trying to understand what was happening.

Cooper remained calm. "Because he wanted it that way. To keep them from falling into Sylvester's hands."

Just then, Olivia spoke up in a tense tone. "Bad news… Someone's coming. And I sense danger."

At her words, Daniel's crossbow string tightened, flames flared in Brenda's palms, and Cooper's red sword shimmered, reflecting against the white snow. Olivia instinctively took a step back, positioning herself behind the three armed friends.

A few seconds later, a silhouette appeared, sprinting down the path toward them.

Daniel narrowed his eyes. "Hold on! It's Ella!" he shouted, raising his hand to stop anyone from mistakenly attacking.

"Ella, are you alright? What happened?" Cooper asked, curiosity laced with caution. Even though he recognized her, his grip on his sword remained firm—he trusted Olivia's instincts.

Ella stared at the four of them, panting, fear and shock mingling on her face. She took deep breaths, trying to steady herself. After a few seconds, she managed to speak in a shaky voice.

"Nivorum… they found our location. They attacked."

Daniel stepped forward, his expression resolute. "We have to help."

Cooper shot Olivia a firm look. "You stay here with Ella. We're going to stop them."

Ella couldn't hold back her tears and shook her head desperately. "There are too many of them… Don't go," she pleaded between sobs.

Brenda clenched her fists and stepped forward. "We have to save the people there," she objected.

Ella's tears fell even faster, her voice barely above a whisper. "They're killing everyone. Serena…"

***

Daniel, Brenda, and Cooper moved without hesitation. Leaving Olivia and Ella behind, they sprinted toward the cave. But as they got closer, they froze at the sight before them.

Hundreds of soldiers in long coats surrounded the cave entrance. The sounds echoing from within made it clear that just as many troops were inside. Occasionally, someone tried to escape—only to be executed mercilessly in bursts of glowing red light.

"They're too many. We need a plan," Daniel said, scanning the crowd.

Cooper took a deep breath, trying to maintain his composure. "We can't get anywhere near them," he said in a steady voice. "They'd kill us instantly."

Brenda narrowed her eyes, focusing on the entrance. "I can throw a fireball that far," she said.

"How many?" Cooper asked immediately.

She bit her lip, hesitating. "Just one… Maybe two, if I really focus."

Cooper's gaze shifted to Daniel, an unspoken question in his eyes.

Daniel clenched his jaw and shook his head. "It's too far. I can't hit anyone from here," he admitted, frustration lacing his voice.

Before they could say anything else, an urgent voice called from behind them. Olivia had caught up, panting as she shouted, "Get away from there now!"

The three of them spun around, confusion written across their faces. They waited for an explanation, their eyes demanding answers.

This time, Olivia's voice rang out sharper, laced with unease. "Sylvester is coming!"

The oppressive energy in the air was so thick that Olivia sensed Sylvester's presence even from this distance.

Brenda instinctively turned back to the cave entrance, scanning the chaotic scene. Through the dust and smoke, she spotted a figure stumbling out—Lady Valtorin. The woman struggled to stay on her feet but lost her balance and collapsed to the ground.

Moments later, Sylvester emerged.

For a few seconds, he merely stared at Lady Valtorin. Then, with sudden precision, he turned his gaze toward his true targets. With a cold flick of his hand, he gave the soldiers a simple command.

"Fire."

In the blink of an eye, red stardust rained down through the falling snow. Death seemed to be pouring from the sky above them.

Cooper summoned his shield and threw himself forward. "Stay behind me!" he shouted. The first few blasts struck his shield, detonating on impact.

Before the second wave could follow, he gave a sharp command, and they all turned, sprinting toward Olivia's direction.

They ran aimlessly through the snow, with no idea where they were going—only that they had to keep moving. Olivia joined them first, followed by Ella. They all knew Sylvester would be right behind them. Stopping wasn't an option.

With her long strides, Ella took the lead, followed closely by Cooper, who was used to the cold. He shouted directions as loudly as he could, guiding her on where to run.

Daniel, Brenda, and Olivia followed.

At the very back, Olivia could feel the ominous energy creeping closer, intensifying with every second.

"They're gaining on us!" she shouted, her voice echoing in the freezing air.

And then, Sylvester and his soldiers suddenly appeared right in front of them.

Sylvester took a step forward, a smug grin curling on his lips.

"I was looking for you all," he said in a mocking tone. "I was quite

upset when you left without saying goodbye last time. I've come to make up for it."

His gaze swept over each of them, locking eyes with every member of the group, as if attempting to instill fear deep within them.

Fatigue burned through their lungs. They were out of breath, the lack of oxygen clouding their minds, making it impossible to think clearly.

"Heir Timothy Cooper… Answer me this, please. Why did you betray your city? Your home… your family…?"

Sylvester's mocking gaze lingered on Cooper. The sneer in his voice and the disgust on his face left no room for doubt—his hatred was palpable. Without waiting for an answer, he continued, "I'm going to give you a chance now, Heir Cooper. If you kneel before me and beg for mercy, I will not punish you."

His cold gaze remained unmoved as he drove the toe of his boot into the thick layer of snow. "Not because I care about you, but because you are from Nivorum."

Cooper slowly turned, his gaze moving over each of the people he had escaped with—Daniel… Olivia… and finally, Brenda. Then, his eyes locked onto Sylvester—the man who had killed their leader, Lando Glisson.

He took a deep breath and began walking toward him, his steps heavy and deliberate. Closer… a little closer… until, right in front of Sylvester, he knelt down on the white snow.

A poisonous smirk spread across Sylvester's lips. "Good," he said, his voice laced with the sickening tone of victory. "Heir Cooper, stand and take your place beside me."

Cooper rose to his feet and stepped up next to him.

"Which one would you like to kill?" Sylvester asked.

His gaze wandered over the fugitives, but the question was meant for Cooper.

"Heir Milner," Cooper answered without the slightest hesitation. His voice was cold, his face unreadable. As he pulled up his mask, his summoned sword gleamed in his hand.

"He's no heir. Just a worthless intern," Sylvester muttered through gritted teeth. Then, with a careless shrug, he added with a loose grin, "Not that it really matters."

Everyone stared in shock at how quickly Cooper had switched sides.

Everyone except one.

Brenda.

With a movement too small for anyone to notice, she subtly hid her right arm behind Daniel's back.

Her fingers quietly ignited with flames.

“Kill him,” Sylvester ordered.

“Yes, Supreme Leader,” Cooper said with a nod.

He took a step forward, moving slowly yet deliberately, his sword tracing a menacing arc as he advanced toward Daniel.

Brenda took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a brief moment. She gathered all her concentration—then, with a swift motion, flung her hand to the side.

In an instant, a massive wall of fire, towering two men high, erupted between the fugitives and the soldiers.

“Run!” Brenda shouted, spinning around. Without hesitation, she sprinted back in the direction they had come.

CHAPTER XV
ACCEPTANCE

Brenda took a deep breath. “He won’t,” she said. “He’s going to investigate Leader Glisson’s tanks. That’s why he had to go back.”

Daniel’s anger eased slightly, but it didn’t fade completely. A lingering sense of betrayal gnawed at him, one he couldn’t shake. “Did he also tell you what we’re supposed to do now?” he scoffed.

“No,” Brenda replied shortly. “From now on, we’re on our own.”

At that moment, Ella entered the room, her eyes red and swollen from crying. She held a black leather-bound book in her hands and silently extended it toward Brenda.

“Leader Glisson’s book. I had given it to Lady Valtorin,” Brenda whispered in surprise.

“She gave it to me before I escaped. She said it should stay with you,” Ella answered.

Brenda took the book and clutched it tightly to her chest.

“Are you okay?” Olivia asked gently. “I’m so sorry.”

Ella slowly sank to the floor, staring blankly at the ground. Her lips trembled. “I don’t know,” she murmured. “I don’t know what I feel… or what I should feel.”

Everyone in the room could feel the weight of Ella’s grief. Daniel had lost his mother. Brenda had lost both her mother and father. Even though Olivia had never experienced such a loss, just being separated from her family had slowly eaten away at her.

Silence settled over them. They waited for the tension in the air to ease.

The only sounds filling the room were uneven breaths and the soft crackling of the firewood.

“What are they going to do to them?” Ella asked. She hoped that the three who had seen Nivorum might at least have an idea. “Why take them away after killing them?”

Brenda shook her head. “I have no idea,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Did they kill everyone?” Olivia asked, curiosity flickering in her eyes.

Ella’s breath hitched, her throat tightening. She struggled to speak. “They only kept Lady Valtorin alive.”

“They took the dead to interrogate them,” Daniel said uneasily, turning to Olivia. “Don’t you remember what happened in

Gardenville? He made the Academy's man talk."

"He killed someone from the Academy?" Ella asked, her voice drained and weary.

Daniel took a deep breath. "Actually—"

"I remember," Olivia cut in quickly. "Sylvester can bring the dead back for a few seconds and make them talk."

"I just hope he hasn't gotten better at it," Daniel said grimly. "If Serena knew anything about the tanks… this could be really bad."

Ella suddenly sprang to her feet, her face twisted with anger. "Are you calling her a liar?" she shouted, stepping toward him. "She told you she didn't know anything!"

Her words came out in furious spits, her breath ragged with rage.

Daniel didn't flinch. He met her gaze with an understanding look and spoke in a calm, steady voice.

"That's not what I meant. Even if she did keep something from us, I wouldn't blame her," he said patiently. "Leader Glisson trusted her. If there was a secret between them, it would make sense for her not to share it."

"She wouldn't tell Sylvester either," Ella choked out, her voice shaking as tears spilled down her face. "Not even while she was dead."

Daniel stood up slowly and approached her, wrapping her in a gentle embrace.

He let her lean against him as she trembled with grief and anger.

"I know," he whispered softly. "You're right. She wouldn't tell him either."

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As the night wore on, Ella's tears gradually subsided. Exhaustion took over, and she drifted into sleep, curled against Olivia's lap, warmed by the fire.

The rest sat in silence, quietly discussing their next move.

"If we can find someone who can control the gateways, we could go home," Olivia said thoughtfully.

Brenda lifted her head, determination flashing in her eyes. "I don't want to go back," she said, her voice firm and unwavering. "There's still one more vengeance I need to take."

Daniel immediately cut in, panic lacing his tone. "No. This won't end, Brenda. You can't live every day chasing revenge."

Brenda shot him a sharp glare. "Whether you like it or not, Sylvester will pay," she said coldly. "What he did to me yesterday, he'll do to Lady Valtorin now." She adjusted her goggles with a single finger, her expression growing even sharper. "With or without you, I'm doing this."

Daniel exhaled heavily. “There’s only one place that could give all three of us what we want,” he said before adding, “The Academy.”

“There’s no way to get there, Daniel,” Brenda countered, frustration creeping into her tone.

He straightened up and looked at the fire. “No, there is,” she said. “Hunt gave some parchments to Leader Glisson. With them, they were able to open a gateway that Hunt could pass through.”

“And where are these parchments?” Brenda asked.

“In Nivorum,” Daniel answered without hesitation.

Olivia nearly shouted, “Are you insane? They’ll kill us there!” Her voice echoed against the cave’s stone walls. She took a deep breath, composing herself before continuing in a calmer tone, “Besides… you’d need a gateway just to get into Nivorum.”

“Olivia’s right,” Brenda agreed. “I’d love nothing more than to strangle Sylvester with my own hands, but without a gateway, it’s impossible.”

“There has to be a way,” Daniel insisted stubbornly. “Cooper said we’re in the same fragment as Nivorum.”

“We don’t even know how big this area is,” Brenda countered, crushing his hope. “It could be hundreds of miles away.”

“She’s right,” Olivia added. “Besides… I’m not even sure if I want to go to the Academy. They wouldn’t let me go back home either.”

“You won’t get back home just by sitting in this cave and waiting,” Daniel argued, trying to pull at least one of them to his side.

“Let’s think about it tomorrow, with clearer minds,” Olivia sighed, leaning her back against the cold cave wall. “Too much has happened in too little time.”

She opened Leader Glisson’s book in her lap. As she turned the pages, an envelope slipped out and floated to the ground.

Carefully, she set the envelope aside before even beginning to read.

“What’s that?” Daniel asked curiously.

Brenda lowered her goggles to the bridge of her nose and glanced at him. Lifting the book slightly, she said, “A manuscript about the rise of the first civilizations. Leader Glisson gave it to me to read when we visited his office.”

“No,” Daniel said, frowning slightly. He gestured toward the envelope beside her. “The other one.”

“It has the parchment you brought,” Brenda said. “Leader Glisson sent it to me while we were in Nivorum, remember? I put it in the envelope to keep it safe.”

“You haven’t figured out what it is?”

“No,” she replied indifferently. “Leader Glisson told me I wouldn’t be able to, even if I tried. It’s written in a different alphabet. But he

said I should keep it with me… that it would be useful someday."

Ella had woken up a few minutes earlier when Olivia raised her voice. Still lying with her head on Olivia's lap, she remained silent, listening to the conversation.

Slowly, she pushed herself up and asked in a sleepy voice, "Can I take a look?"

Brenda's eyes flicked between the envelope and her, hesitating. Finally, she took a deep breath.

"Go ahead," she said, carefully handing it over. "Please be careful. Leader Glisson always told me to keep it with me—he said one day, I'd need it."

"Don't worry," she replied softly. Moving beside Brenda, she sat down next to her. With great care, she opened the envelope and pulled out the paper inside.

Her eyes slowly scanned the text.

A faint whisper escaped her lips, making Brenda turn toward her.

Surprised, Brenda asked, "You can read it?"

A sudden gleam appeared in her eyes.

"Yes," she murmured, almost in disbelief. "This is the Luxsophis alphabet."

Daniel could no longer stay still—he suddenly jumped to his feet.

"What does it say?" he asked, his voice filled with excitement and hope.

She took a deep breath, gripping the paper tightly in her hands, and began to read aloud in a calm, steady voice:

"Ink turns to embers, breath merges with the sky.
Smoke unravels, fragments align.
Letters glow, the gateway is woven.
With light and wisdom, we become one."

"What does that even mean?" Daniel asked, glancing at each of them in turn.

"It's talking about the gateway," Olivia said.

Ella shook her head. "I don't know," she admitted. "I've never seen anything like this before. It's like… a riddle."

Brenda rose to her feet in silence, determination flashing in her eyes. "I think I do," she said. Taking the thick parchment from Ella's hands, she stepped forward and approached the fire.

Without a moment's hesitation, she tossed the paper into the flames.

Daniel's voice rose in panic. "Are you out of your mind? That was our only clue!"

Brenda didn't answer. She didn't even look at him. Her gaze remained fixed on the parchment as it burned.

Olivia and Ella watched in silence.

Within seconds, the thick parchment dissolved into a cloud of smoke, scattering through the cave. But the letters on it—those did not burn. They shimmered, glowing as they lifted into the air, swirling around them.

All four of them stared at the glowing ink fragments, as if some invisible force had locked their eyes onto the spectacle. Their heads turned left and right, following the floating lights like cats chasing a laser pointer.

The shimmering fragments gathered, intensifying as they merged—until, right in front of them, a new gateway took shape.

For a few breathless seconds, they watched in stunned silence.

Then, someone stepped through.

Andrew Hunt.

His face was painted with shock, the look of a man who had found himself in a place he neither recognized nor expected. His eyes darted around, taking in his unfamiliar surroundings. He was not supposed to be here.

Then, in the midst of the gathered figures, his gaze landed on Daniel. His brow furrowed.

“You… What are you doing here?”

His eyes flicked across the others, scanning the room. The confusion in them deepened.

“Envoy Lloyd…”

Ella gasped. “Principal Hunt!” she cried, running toward the stout man and throwing her arms around him. Her voice trembled. “Take me back. I’m losing my mind here.”

Hunt, after overcoming his initial shock, gently rubbed her back. He pulled away slightly, searching her face.

“Don’t worry, Lloyd. I’ll take you home,” he said in a reassuring tone. His eyes swept through the cave once more. “Where are Lando and Mark?” he asked. Since they were the only ones who knew how to open this gateway, their absence caught his attention.

“Sylvester killed them,” Daniel said, his voice heavy with sorrow.

Hunt slowly nodded. Though he and Lando Glisson, as well as Mark Oscar, had been on different fronts, they had shared a bond of friendship. The weight of losing two old allies flickered across his face for a brief moment, but he quickly composed himself. He had to remain strong in the eyes of the young people before him.

“Alright,” he said, taking a deep breath. “How did you open the gateway?”

“With a parchment Leader Glisson gave us,” Brenda replied, gesturing toward the fire in the middle of the cave. “He said it might come in handy one day.”

Hunt pondered this for a few seconds, then turned to Ella and spoke in a gentle voice.

"Envoy Lloyd, go on ahead and wait for me."

She nodded. Her gaze lingered on the people beside her for a moment. Taking a deep breath, she gave the cave one last look before stepping into the gateway without hesitation, vanishing from sight.

"I suppose I wouldn't be wrong to assume you didn't open this gateway just for Envoy Lloyd," Hunt said, narrowing his eyes at Daniel.

"Sylvester is coming for us too. He wants to kill all of us," Daniel explained.

Hunt nodded, his expression unreadable. "I assume you want to go to the Academy."

"Yes, I do. And I know you want to take me there."

"Alright," Hunt said, not drawing out the conversation. "Let's go."

He took a few steps toward the gateway but suddenly hesitated and turned back.

The three friends were following behind him.

"Where do you all think you're going?" he asked. Then, pointing at Daniel, he added, "I can only take him."

Silence fell over the cave. The three exchanged glances.

"Go on," Brenda said, trying to hold back the tears welling in her eyes. She smiled faintly. The butterflies that had fluttered inside her the first time she saw Daniel on the bus were now disappearing, one by one.

"Besides, your aim is terrible. If you don't get trained, you won't survive here," she added, her voice trembling. It was a joke—one meant to mask her emotions—but the shimmer in her eyes gave her away.

Olivia's eyes were glistening too, though she remained calmer. She stepped forward in silence, placing a firm hand on Daniel's shoulder, pressing gently to reassure him.

"Don't worry about us," she said, her voice soft but steady. "It doesn't matter where I am if I can't go home to my family."

Daniel's gaze shifted between the two of them.

"Just go already," Brenda said again, a tear rolling down her cheek. She didn't want to drag out the goodbye—words were catching in her throat. All she needed was for this moment to pass quickly so she could finally let herself cry.

"What are you two talking about?" Daniel asked, his voice rising slightly. Then he turned to Hunt, eyes burning with defiance.

"They're coming too."

"That's not possible," Hunt said firmly. "I can't take students from Nivorum into the Academy."

“But you want to take me,” Daniel shot back, anger creeping into his voice. “If they’re not coming, neither am I.”

Hunt took a deep breath and rubbed his temples. Then he looked at Daniel.

“I can’t make this decision on my own.”

Daniel stepped back, rejoining his friends. “But I can,” he said, his tone resolute. “Sylvester and his army are out there searching for us. If that Academy you’re so proud of abandons people to die, then I don’t need to be there either.”

Hunt remained silent for a moment, staring at him with a thoughtful expression. Then, exhaling deeply, he finally said, short and firm,

“Go inside.”

After a brief pause, he added, “All of you.”

Daniel dipped his head slightly, then turned to Brenda and Olivia with a small smile. Without another word, he stepped toward the gateway.

***

Daniel began to feel gravity again. His feet planted more firmly on the ground. Slowly, he opened his eyes. A gentle spring breeze filled his lungs, the warm wind brushing lightly against his face. In that moment, despite the chaos and uncertainty he had left behind, a strange sense of peace washed over him.

When his vision fully adjusted, he saw a two-story structure rising before him, its entrance marked by a grand marble staircase. On either side of the steps, four massive stone blocks supported enormous lanterns, their interiors glowing with stardust, casting a soft radiance over the area. These steps led to the elegant yet imposing Luxsophis Academy.

The building’s façade was adorned with finely carved columns, each intricately detailed with delicate craftsmanship. Between them, tall oval windows allowed warm light to spill outward, softening the night beyond. The engravings stretched upward, covering the entire front of the Academy, blending artistry with silent authority.

Daniel took in his surroundings with awe. The towering, hundred-and-ten-story main building had impressed him, but this seemingly modest two-story marble structure possessed an unexpected grandeur that left him breathless.

It took him a few seconds to realize the Academy extended for hundreds of meters in both directions.

Then, as he turned around, his breath hitched once more.

The gateway’s frame was sculpted from flawless marble, mirroring

the elegance of the Academy's exterior. But what truly stole his breath was the view beyond it—a vast, endless ocean stretching toward infinity. The boundless blue merged seamlessly with the sky at the horizon.

A few seconds later, Olivia stepped through the gateway, followed by Brenda.

The same look of admiration that had flickered across Daniel's face now appeared on theirs as well.

"I never said you all were accepted into the Academy."

Hunt's voice came, no longer from the gateway, but from the top of the marble staircase. His tone was firm, authoritative.

"You'll be taken to the guesthouse. We need to discuss this among ourselves. After that, we'll decide what to do with you all."

He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and pulled out a slender pen. With a light press on the button at the back, a shimmering cluster of light burst from its tip, forming a small cube in the air.

"You can't bring your symbols," Hunt said, his gaze sweeping over each of them.

Daniel glanced at his friends before turning back, determination settling on his face.

"Let's hand them over," he said without hesitation.

He recalled the advice Hunt had given him during their first meeting—getting rid of their symbols was the first step toward being accepted into the Academy. Following the rules was the only way to ensure both his safety and that of his friends. Without hesitation, he removed the symbol from his wrist and placed it inside the glowing cube.

Olivia followed suit. Parting with her symbol wasn't a difficult decision—she had never formed the same deep attachment to it as the others had. She reached for her earrings and dropped them into the cube without hesitation.

Brenda, however, hesitated.

For a brief moment, uncertainty flickered across her face. She didn't want to lose her abilities. Not for herself, but because she wanted to punish those who deserved it.

"If you are not accepted into the Academy, you will get your symbols back," Hunt said, noticing her hesitation.

"Do it," Daniel whispered. There was no command in his voice—just a quiet plea.

Brenda slipped into his mind for a fleeting second. In that instant, she saw how much he wanted her to stay. She realized there was a connection between them—one that couldn't be put into words.

She looked at her ring one last time. Then, taking a deep breath,

she slipped it off her finger and let it fall into the glowing cube.

Hunt pressed the button on the pen once more. The cube swiftly dissolved, dispersing into the Academy's courtyard, leaving behind a faint trail of golden sparkles that formed a thin, glowing path.

"Follow the light and rest," Hunt instructed. "Tomorrow, we will decide what happens next."

Following the lights, they walked through the Academy's vast garden, which stretched along the coastline. The gentle rustling of leaves accompanied the rhythmic crash of waves against the shore. At the end of the path, a refined entrance gate stood before them. When Daniel pushed it open slightly, the soft creak of the hinges echoed in the quiet air.

"What do you feel?" Daniel asked, turning his gaze to Olivia.

"Better than ever," she replied with a faint smile. "There's only positive energy here."

The three of them stepped inside together, their pace slow yet filled with anticipation. The polished parquet floor reflected the overhead lights, gleaming like glass. A red carpet ran the length of the corridor, and from the high ceilings, large crystal chandeliers cast a dim yet warm glow.

At the far end of the hallway, a well-dressed man in his forties approached them. His face bore a welcoming smile.

"Welcome to the Academy's guesthouse," he said, his voice gentle. "Principal Hunt has instructed me to escort you to your temporary rooms. Please, follow me."

Trusting her instincts, Olivia gave a small nod of approval and exchanged glances with her friends, offering them a reassuring look. She sensed no threat from either the place or the man. Together, they followed him down the corridor.

After a short walk, the man stopped and spoke again in the same polite tone.

"These are the rooms assigned to you," he said, gesturing toward three doors standing side by side. "Principal Hunt will inform you of the next steps in the morning." With a courteous nod, he added, "I wish you a good night," before quietly disappearing down the hallway.

"Is this real?" Daniel asked as he stood before the doors. After months of chaos and danger, being welcomed with such kindness felt almost surreal.

"I suppose so," Brenda replied, though her voice carried caution. "But let's not get ahead of ourselves. We were never told we were accepted here."

Olivia let out a deep sigh. As much as she enjoyed the Academy's peaceful atmosphere, the weight of longing within her was stronger.

“We’ll find out tomorrow,” she said, opening one of the doors.

Daniel followed suit, stepping into his assigned room.

The space resembled an elegant hotel suite—modern, meticulously furnished, and impeccably tidy. As he entered, his eyes fell on a neatly folded pair of fresh pajamas laid carefully on the bed. He ran his fingertips over the soft fabric, appreciating its smooth texture. Then, he turned toward the mirror in the corner of the room.

Half of his face was covered in dust and grime, and the dark circles under his eyes bore the weight of exhaustion. His clothes were nearly unrecognizable—layers of old, tattered garments from the cave still clung to his body.

Slowly, he made his way to the bathroom. It was just as elegant and modern as the rest of the room. Without hesitation, he stripped off his filthy clothes and stepped under the steaming water.

Lady Stewart’s ruined house. Lando Glisson’s underground office. Serena’s hidden cave…

For the first time in what felt like an eternity, he truly felt at ease. As the dirt and mud washed away, it was as if the weight of all his hardships was being cleansed from his soul.

After nearly half an hour under the soothing stream of hot water, he dried himself off and slipped into the fresh pajamas.

Then, he walked toward the window, intending to take a look outside.

But just as he reached it, a sudden knock at the door made him freeze.

A flood of memories rushed through his mind like a film reel—months of living in fear of Sylvester, where every knock at the door brought nothing but dread. His pulse quickened, a cold shiver running down his spine. He took a deep breath.

This time was different. This place was supposed to be safe.

Steadying himself, he squared his shoulders and walked toward the door. Slowly, he pulled it open.

A small food cart stood just outside. He glanced around, but the hallway was empty. There was no one in sight.

Pulling the cart inside, he shut the door and curiously lifted the metal cover.

Beneath it, a beautifully plated dish of roasted fish lay garnished with lemon and asparagus. A small, fresh salad accompanied it, along with a delicate glass of white wine.

After finishing the meal, exhaustion settled deep in his bones. He had planned to visit his friends’ rooms, exchange a few words—but he no longer had the strength to keep his eyes open.

Slowly, he slipped under the covers.

The moment his head touched the pillow, sleep claimed him.

***

Daniel jolted awake at the sound of loud, urgent knocking.

For a moment, he was disoriented. It felt as though he had only been asleep for a few minutes, yet the soft light streaming through the window and the distant chirping of birds told him otherwise—morning had already begun.

Feeling surprisingly refreshed, he pushed back the covers and got out of bed. He made his way to the door, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. When he opened it, he found Brenda, Olivia, and the polite attendant from the previous night standing outside.

"Are you okay?" the attendant asked in that same soft, courteous tone.

Daniel blinked in surprise. "Yes," he managed to say. He hadn't expected this much attentiveness.

Brenda smirked slightly. She slipped into his mind and saw it clearly—one glass of wine had been enough to knock him out.

"We need to go meet with Principal Hunt. Get changed so we can leave," she said, a hint of teasing in her voice.

Only then did Daniel take notice of his friends' outfits.

Brenda was wearing a long, colorful floral dress. Simple yet elegant, it suited her perfectly. Olivia, on the other hand, had opted for a comfortable pair of jeans and a black blouse. Neither of them wore the strange embroidery, embossed patterns, or heavy fabrics typical of Nivorum's clothing.

As Daniel found himself momentarily lost in thought, studying their outfits, the attendant gently reminded him,

"Before opening the wardrobe, think about what you'd like to wear."

***

Daniel walked back along the same path they had taken the night before, this time without the guiding lights, alongside Brenda and Olivia. He was dressed in a black, short-sleeved T-shirt and a pair of comfortable knee-length shorts.

"You adjusted quickly," Olivia teased, peering at him over her sunglasses, a playful yet genuine smile on her face.

Daniel smirked slightly, keeping his gaze fixed on the endless, flawless ocean stretching beside them. "Sunglasses never even crossed my mind," he joked. Then, turning to Olivia, he asked, "Do you think you'll get used to this place?"

Olivia shook her head, a quiet determination tinged with melancholy crossing her face.

“If I can find a way to leave…” she murmured.

“Can we at least enjoy one day?” Brenda sighed. The long months of captivity and hardship were finally behind them. “I’m exhausted,” she added.

Olivia gave her a knowing nod before a mischievous grin crept onto her face. She had been saving a remark for just the right moment—and now was the time to use it.

“Plenty of good hiding spots for sneaking off to kiss, don’t you think?” she said with a teasing grin.

Brenda’s pale skin quickly flushed pink. She nudged Olivia with her elbow, trying—but failing—to suppress the smile tugging at her lips.

“What?” Olivia laughed. “Didn’t you say we should enjoy this place?”

Daniel didn’t join in their playful banter. His focus was on the staircase leading up to the Academy’s main entrance. At the top, standing tall in a brown suit, Principal Andrew Hunt was waiting for them.

Taking a steady breath, Daniel murmured, “Let’s see what’s waiting for us,” in an effort to draw Brenda and Olivia’s attention back to the moment.

As they approached the stairs, Hunt wasted no time.

“Upstairs, we’ll need to ask you all a few questions,” he said. “After that, we’ll make our final decision. Follow me.”

Without another word, he turned and ascended the marble steps toward the grand entrance.

When the door swung open, the sight that greeted them was even more breathtaking than what they had seen in the guesthouse the night before.

The floor gleamed with flawlessly polished parquet, with elegant red carpets stretching all the way to the staircase. Two intricately carved columns stood just beyond the entrance, framing the stairs like a painting. A grand staircase curved up on both sides, leading to the upper floor.

Above it all, a massive crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, its brilliance illuminating the entire hall.

As they followed Hunt through the grand space, the three of them exchanged awestruck glances, taking in their surroundings. Soon, they reached a large open doorway.

In the very center of the room sat an elegant desk, positioned directly beneath an enormous window. Beyond the glass, the Academy’s breathtaking ocean view stretched endlessly into the horizon.

Hunt settled into the chair behind the desk, his expression

composed and authoritative.

"Sit," he said coolly, gesturing to the three guest chairs in front of him.

Without hesitation, Daniel took the middle seat, with Brenda on his left and Olivia on his right.

Hunt sat upright, scanning the three of them.

"We discussed your situation last night," he said, his eyes shifting between them. "However, before making a final decision, we need to learn more about you."

He pulled a pen from the inner pocket of his jacket and tapped it against the three sheets of paper on the desk.

At once, the papers lifted into the air, glowing with golden light before settling in front of each of them.

"Please fill these out completely," Hunt said, his tone calm and unwavering.

Daniel glanced over the questions. They ranged from details about their past lives to their education in Nivorum, their expectations of the Academy, and their hopes for the future. There were also sections about their abilities—where they had used them, how they had developed them, and under what circumstances.

Olivia leaned forward impatiently. "Can we have a pen?" she asked, eager to write I want to return to my family in the future aspirations section.

Hunt glanced at the Luxsophis Academy pen in his hand, an almost imperceptible smile flickering across his lips.

"I don't know," he said calmly. "Whether you can have a pen is something we'll find out in a few hours."

Brenda spoke up in a soft voice. "To answer the questions."

Hunt responded in the same composed tone.

"Just focus on the question and think of your answer."

As if on cue, Olivia's paper had already begun to display her response:

I want to return to my family.

CHAPTER XVI

FAREWELL

It had been over an hour and a half since they had turned in their papers and stepped out into the Academy's garden. The three friends sat side by side on a long pier extending into the sea, their legs dangling over the water as they waited.

"Do you think they'll accept us into the Academy?" Brenda asked.

"They will," Daniel said firmly. "They wanted to accept me. Why wouldn't they want you?"

She offered a faint smile, but beneath it lay a deep-seated doubt. "They've wanted you since Gardenville."

"That was because I could summon weapons earlier than expected," he said, hoping to reassure her. "Right now, you're stronger than me." His gaze was warm and sincere.

Olivia chuckled. "Then I really don't stand a chance."

"You have your instincts," he pointed out, turning to her. "You've saved us from trouble more times than I can count."

She laughed again, though this time, something deeper lurked in her expression. "You're flattering me." Then, her face grew serious. "Time moves faster here, Daniel. Every day is like a week. I don't care about the Academy or Nivorum."

Brenda reached out, resting a gentle hand on Olivia's back. "Don't worry. I'll always be by your side," she said softly. Taking a deep breath, she added, "Both of us will probably be sent back through that gateway soon enough."

"Ella's coming," Olivia said suddenly, her gaze shifting toward the distant Academy gate.

A few seconds later, the massive door creaked open, and Ella, looking just as formidable as the gate itself, stepped into the garden. With confident strides, she made her way toward the pier.

"The Academy will definitely accept that ability," Daniel said with a small laugh, referring to Olivia's sharp intuition.

Brenda turned to him quickly, lowering her voice in warning. "Don't mention Serena. Her mind is clean—she isn't thinking about it."

As Ella approached, she offered a faint smile. "Enjoying the view?"

"After months of staring at nothing but snow, it's a nice change," Olivia replied, sweeping her eyes over the sea.

"This is the best place you could be. Enjoy it," Ella said, giving the

ocean a brief glance before turning back to them. “And come see me on the weekends.”

“See you?” Daniel echoed, raising an eyebrow.

She studied him for a moment. “You don’t actually think Luxsophis is just this Academy, do you?”

When none of them answered, she paused, eyes widening slightly. “You do think that.”

“What’s outside the Academy?” Brenda asked.

Ella’s smile was faint but knowing. “Anything you want. There’s a whole city out there—bigger than London.”

Olivia lifted an eyebrow in surprise. “Is there a newspaper or a news service?” The first thing that came to her mind was the office desk she so deeply missed.

“Not daily, but we have weekly newspapers,” Ella replied. “There aren’t enough events to report every day,” she added with a small grin.

“Then I guess there are no football matches,” Daniel joked.

Ella laughed along with him. “Actually, there were,” she said, her grin widening. “But once people started using their abilities, things got… out of hand. So, they had to cancel it.”

Just then, a soft beeping sound came from her pocket. “I have to go,” she said with a small smile.

“Where are we supposed to find you?” Daniel asked, watching as Ella strode toward the Academy gates.

“Get on a bus in front of the Academy and tell them you want to go to the embassy building,” she called over her shoulder, not even bothering to turn around. With a casual wave, she passed through the gates and disappeared from sight.

Daniel turned to the girls beside him. “Did she just say… bus?”

Brenda smiled. “Yes.”

Olivia’s curiosity flickered. “Is the outside really like the world we came from?” But the thought barely had time to settle before reality sank in—no matter what was out there, the people she loved were gone. Her smile faded. “Not that it really matters.”

***

It had been half an hour since Ella left, and ten minutes since Olivia had been called inside. For Daniel and Brenda, the wait dragged on. The only sound was the rhythmic crash of the waves against the pier.

Then, a voice echoed from the Academy building.

“Daniel Milner, you are expected in Principal Andrew Hunt’s office.”

Daniel slowly rose. Taking a deep breath, he gave a small smile. “This is the moment of fate.”

“Your fate is already decided,” Brenda replied with a faint smile. She reached out, giving his leg a gentle squeeze. “Go and take the pen.”

His smile deepened. “I will. It’s probably sitting right next to yours.” Determination shone in his eyes.

“Go on, don’t be late,” she said, though the sorrow in her voice was impossible to hide.

Daniel nodded and started toward the Academy. He had barely reached the end of the pier when Brenda’s voice rang out behind him.

“If we never see each other again… don’t forget me, okay?”

He froze. His lips trembled, his eyes burned. A sharp breath caught in his throat. Slowly, he turned. Even from a distance, he could see the raw emotion in her honey-colored eyes. The way they glistened, the way they pleaded.

Without a second thought, he rushed back.

Brenda sprang to her feet, her heart pounding like a war drum. She ran to meet him. And at the very center of the pier, they lost themselves in their first real kiss.

The world around them faded. The Academy, the sea, the uncertainty of tomorrow—none of it mattered. Only this moment. Only them.

Minutes passed before they finally pulled away, breathless, foreheads resting together, their breaths mingling.

“Daniel Milner, you are expected in Principal Andrew Hunt’s office.”

Brenda wiped her tears, laughing softly. “You’re going to get expelled before you even get accepted,” she teased, her voice still shaking. “Go on now.”

“I’ll be waiting for you inside,” he promised. “This isn’t a goodbye.”

She swallowed hard. “Okay. But if it is… I love you, Daniel.”

His own tears fell freely now. “I love you too. You’re actually really sweet when you’re not setting everything on fire.”

“Go already,” she said, giving him a playful shove.

As he walked away, she watched him, her gaze never leaving his back. He glanced over his shoulder once. Then twice. Each time, their eyes met.

And with every step he took, Brenda became more certain—this was a goodbye.

***

Daniel took the stairs two at a time, bursting into Principal Hunt's office, breathless.

"Are you alright?" Hunt asked, studying him carefully.

Daniel's eyes were red from crying, his face flushed from the run. He nodded. "Yes," he managed. But as his gaze drifted past Hunt, out the window, he saw Brenda—alone, sitting at the edge of the pier.

"We've actually made our decisions, Milner," Hunt said, motioning toward a chair. "But there's one thing we're still undecided on."

"Don't be undecided," Daniel said, urgency creeping into his voice. "You have to accept all three of us."

Hunt gestured toward the chair again, this time more firmly. "Please, sit. There's something important we need to discuss."

Daniel hesitated, glancing at the window once more. Brenda's feet dangled over the water, swinging slowly. Even from here, her unease was obvious.

"Alright," he muttered, forcing himself to look away as he sank into the chair. "What do I have to do for you to accept all three of us?"

Hunt met his gaze. "Do you remember the day we met at the city library?"

Daniel frowned slightly. "Yes."

"That day, I erased a memory from your mind."

His stomach twisted. "The moment I killed your student."

"Yes," Hunt confirmed with a slight nod. "I did it so you wouldn't carry the guilt because of the symbol."

Daniel held his stare in silence.

"Brenda Lewis carries overwhelming emotions," Hunt continued. "Regret, hatred, grief… What she feels is too strong for us to allow into the Academy."

Daniel shook his head quickly. "No. You can't do this. You can't send her away."

"Calm down, Milner. No one is being sent away," Hunt reassured him. "But we have to do for her what we did for you."

Daniel's throat tightened. "I don't understand."

Hunt leaned forward, lowering his voice. "Listen carefully, Milner. The only way we can accept Brenda Lewis into the Academy… is by erasing what's in her mind."

Daniel inhaled sharply. "Alright. If we erase those memories, she'll be accepted?"

Hunt's voice remained steady. "Her emotions are so intense that… taking just one memory won't be enough. They're all connected. We need to erase everything she's been through in the past two months."

Daniel's heart clenched. His gaze flickered toward the window again. Brenda was still there.

“So… she’ll forget me too,” he said, the realization washing over him like ice.

“She’ll also forget the pain she’s endured,” Hunt said, gentle but firm. “She won’t carry the guilt of the people she tried to save. Or… she can remember you, but that means she stays outside while you’re in here.”

Daniel exhaled shakily. Words caught in his throat.

“Alright,” he finally whispered. “If it’s what’s best for her.”

“It is, Milner.” Hunt pulled open a drawer, retrieving an elegant pen. He placed it in Daniel’s hand. “Welcome to the Academy, Daniel Milner.”

Daniel stared at the pen, turning it between his fingers. It was identical to the one he had seen in Ella’s hand.

Hunt noticed the fragility in his smile. “Brenda Lewis is a strong woman,” he said with certainty. “At the Academy, she’ll become who she’s meant to be. Don’t worry.”

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The moment his conversation with Principal Hunt ended, Daniel bolted down the stairs just as fast as he had climbed them. Breathless, he burst outside.

The pier was empty. No sign of Brenda or Olivia. He hadn’t seen them outside either.

Heart pounding, he sprinted across the academy garden toward the guesthouse where they had stayed the night before. He pushed the door open and rushed inside, heading straight for the rooms.

The soft-spoken man who had shown them to their rooms the previous night suddenly appeared in front of him. “How may I assist you?”

Daniel barely stopped to catch his breath. “Did my friends come here?”

“No. Your rooms have been closed. Your stay was for one night only,” the man replied in his usual polite tone.

Daniel held up the pen in his hand.

“Ah, you’ve become an academy student. Congratulations,” the man said with a gentle smile. “But this is a guesthouse. Students stay in the dormitories in the main building.”

Daniel didn’t respond. He turned and rushed back outside, running across the garden before climbing the marble stairs again. Taking a deep breath, he stepped into the building and started searching the long corridors for the dormitories. At the very least, he hoped to find Brenda or Olivia there.

After nearly an hour of searching, he finally found the girls’

dormitory. Since he couldn't enter, he sank onto the floor in front of the door and waited.

At last, a girl in her late twenties with short black hair stepped out. She glanced at Daniel curiously before continuing down the hall.

"Wait a second," he called after her. "Is there a new student inside?"

She stopped in the middle of the corridor, studying him with growing curiosity. "A new student?" She raised an eyebrow, then glanced at her watch, checking the date. "In the middle of October?"

Daniel held up his pen. "I'm new too. I'm looking for my friends."

The girl gave him a strange look but didn't question it further. "No one new has arrived," she said simply. Then, without another word, she turned and disappeared into the dimly lit corridor.

All at once, the ground seemed to slip away beneath him. The possibility that Hunt had lied to him hit like a crashing wave, drowning him in fear.

His chest tightened. His breath turned shallow. His vision blurred.

He stumbled, his balance failing—then everything went black.

The last thing he felt was the rough texture of the carpet slamming against his face and the sharp sting of pain shooting through his nose as he collapsed.

***

"Daniel… Daniel… Are you alright? Wake up already…"

A soft voice filled his ears, pulling him from the depths of unconsciousness. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

"Brenda!"

"My name is Elise," said the blonde girl standing before him, her cheerful smile unwavering. She looked to be around his age, with an almost angelic beauty to her features. Though short, she carried herself with strength and confidence.

Daniel swallowed with difficulty, his lips dry and cracked. "Nice to meet you," he croaked.

Elise's smile deepened. "You can be glad to meet me later," she said lightly, then brought the cup in her hand to his parched lips, supporting his head with her other hand.

With each sip, the burning fire inside him gradually faded, replaced by a soothing coolness.

"Thank you," he murmured, licking his lips. He glanced around. "Where am I?"

"You're in the infirmary," Elise replied. "You hit your head pretty hard."

Her expression tensed slightly as her gaze landed on his nose, its

noticeably crooked state making her hesitate. Deciding to ignore it, she swiftly changed the subject.

"They actually considered taking you to the hospital, but since you're new, they thought it'd be better for you to stay at the academy."

Daniel sat up a little, his hope flaring. "Are there any other new students besides me?"

Elise flashed another bright smile. "Strangely enough, yes," she said, nodding. "Everyone's been talking about it since yesterday. It's not common for students to be admitted this late… especially two of them."

Daniel's heart pounded. "What are their names?" he asked eagerly, desperate to confirm that Brenda and Olivia were here.

"One of them is you," Elise said, her smile unwavering. "And the other one… I forgot the first name, but the last name… the last name… oh, I remember now—Lewis."

A rush of relief spread through Daniel, excitement lifting the weight off his chest. Brenda was here.

"What about the other one?" he asked quickly. "Is it Thompson?"

Elise raised her eyebrows slightly, meeting his eyes. "I don't understand."

"You said there were two new students. The other one—her last name is Thompson, right? Olivia Thompson…"

Elise shook her head. "No," she said without hesitation. "I've never heard that name. The only new students are you and the girl with the last name Lewis."

Daniel froze. His thoughts spiraled into a vortex, his gaze drifting into emptiness.

The possibility that Olivia had been sent out alone struck him like a physical blow. His heart, which had been racing just moments ago, suddenly felt like it had come to a dead stop. In his mind, hundreds of scenarios formed and vanished in the blink of an eye—Olivia falling into Sylvester's hands, getting caught in another gang's trap, struggling with hunger in some desolate cave, harming herself after losing her family and now her friends too…

Each thought was an invisible knife stabbing into his chest, leaving deep, lingering pain.

"Are you alright?" Elise asked, her usual smile replaced by concern. His sudden silence unsettled her. Then, as if realizing something, she quickly added in a slightly panicked tone, "Principal Hunt told me to give this to you when you woke up."

She picked up a newspaper from the bedside table and handed it to him.

Daniel forced himself to focus as he took it, his eyes immediately

drawn to a large photo on the front page.

In the middle of a crowd, a familiar face stood out.

"Olivia," he whispered, his gaze locking onto the girl he had once admired.

Then, he began reading the text beneath the photo..

MISSING JOURNALIST FOUND!

One of our newspaper's most esteemed reporters, Olivia Thompson, has finally returned to her desk after a baffling disappearance lasting a year and a half.

Exactly 560 days ago, Thompson set off on a one-week vacation—only to vanish without a trace.

Two weeks ago, she was found outside her family's home, regaining consciousness with no memory of where she had been during her absence. In an exclusive interview, Thompson stated:

"I don't know where I went or what happened to me."

Doctors have since confirmed she is experiencing mild amnesia, leaving many questions unanswered.

However, one detail has made the case even more perplexing. Thompson insists she remembers only two names: Daniel and Brenda. She is certain these individuals played a role in her survival but struggles to recall any further details.

Authorities have taken a keen interest in the case, particularly due to a missing persons report from the same time period. Records confirm that a young man named Daniel Milner also vanished around the same time Thompson did.

Detectives are currently investigating whether the Olivia Thompson remembers is, in fact, Daniel Milner. Neurology experts have also joined the case, hoping to uncover the truth behind her missing time.

Daniel couldn't stop a single tear from slipping down his cheek. Quietly, he whispered, "I'm sure you're much happier now. I'll miss you so much, Olivia. Be happy with your family."

Noticing the expression on his face, Elise tilted her head curiously. "It's nothing bad, right?"

"No," Daniel said, swallowing the lump in his throat. He wiped away his tear and forced a small smile. "A very dear friend of mine

finally found the happiness she deserved."

Carefully, he tore out the newspaper article, folded it neatly, and opened the drawer beside him.

"If you want to keep that, you should take it with you," Elise said with a small smile. "We need to get to breakfast. You don't want to be late for your first day of classes."

Daniel blinked. "I thought it was the weekend."

A wide smile spread across Elise's face. "You slept longer than you think, Daniel," she said, extending a hand to help him up. "I can call you Daniel, right?"

He took her hand and slowly stood. "Of course, that's fine."

As they walked, Elise glanced at him. "Principal Hunt assigned me to help with your adaptation process. First, we're heading to breakfast, and then we have Dr. Alden Mercer's class."

***

The academy's elegant corridors were far more crowded than Daniel remembered. Most of the students were young, but among them were middle-aged individuals, and even some noticeably older. Unlike the cold, distant atmosphere of Nivorum, everyone here seemed remarkably friendly.

"This way," Elise said, gliding through a wide doorway.

They stepped onto a spacious balcony overlooking the sea. It was large, with students gathered in small groups for breakfast. Dozens of four-person tables were lined up in neat rows. Some students stood to drop off their empty plates, while others searched for a place to sit.

"Come with me," Elise said, grabbing Daniel's arm and pulling him along.

He tried to keep up, but his eyes constantly scanned the tables, searching for any sign of Brenda—hoping to spot a familiar face.

At the far end of the balcony, they reached a side table stacked with clean plates. Elise picked up two, handing one to him.

"Just close your eyes and think about what you want for breakfast," she said.

Daniel glanced at Elise's plate and saw a few small tomatoes and avocado toast. Curious, he closed his eyes.

The first thing that came to mind was the carefully prepared breakfasts Lady Stewart used to make. When he opened his eyes, his plate was filled with grilled tomatoes, sausages, sautéed mushrooms, fried eggs, and crispy toasted bread.

Elise let out a small laugh. "Looks like you were pretty hungry," she teased.

"There's nothing like a good breakfast after a long sleep," Daniel

replied, recalling the rough days he had spent in the ruined house.

Elise glanced around. “The hard part is finding ourselves a table,” she said. Then, her eyes locked onto a spot. “There’s an empty one over there. Come on.”

They made their way to a table where a lone student sat eating breakfast. He looked a few years older than Daniel, wearing a stylish blue sport shirt and white dress trousers. His dark hair was neatly styled, with the front strands swept to the side. His clean-shaven face and well-proportioned physique gave him the air of a young model.

“Good morning, Kyle. Can we sit here?” Elise asked politely.

“Of course,” the young man replied, inclining his head slightly. Then, turning to Daniel, he studied him carefully.

“You must be the new student,” he said, extending his hand. “Kyle Clarke.”

Daniel shook his hand. “Daniel Milner.” Then he settled into the empty chair.

Elise gestured toward Kyle. “Kyle is one of the most well-known names at the academy. His mother is a famous tailor. They own several stores in Luxsophis.”

A memory flashed in Daniel’s mind—a familiar sign. Clark’s.

“I think there’s one in Nivorum Square too,” he said.

Kyle’s expression shifted instantly. His eyes widened as he locked onto Daniel.

“How do you know that?” His voice carried a faint edge of anger. “You’d do well to keep your mouth shut.”

Daniel hadn’t expected such a reaction. Keeping his expression calm, he shrugged.

“I just happened to notice the sign when I passed by a few times,” he said.

Kyle quickly scanned the area, ensuring no one was eavesdropping. Once satisfied, he loosened up slightly, though his gaze remained sharp.

“People who’ve been there aren’t exactly welcome here. Watch yourself,” he muttered in a hushed tone.

Daniel, refusing to show intimidation, focused on his plate and replied in an indifferent, steady voice, “At least my last name isn’t hanging on a sign over Nivorum Square.”

Kyle clenched his teeth, his fingers twitching slightly as he glanced around again. Then, with a sharp breath through his nose, he abruptly stood, grabbed his plate, and stormed off, leaving behind a tense silence.

Leaning in slightly, Elise lowered her voice. “They have branches in Nivorum Square? Why were you there?”

Daniel let out a quiet sigh, still not lifting his head. “Long story.”

He paused before adding, “It was… unavoidable.”

Just then, a familiar voice interrupted them.

“Is this seat taken?”

Daniel’s breath caught in his throat. Slowly, he lifted his head, and in an instant, his heart began pounding, as if trying to break free from his chest.

There she was.

Brenda.

Her honey-colored eyes gleamed behind her glasses, just as he remembered. An indescribable wave of happiness surged through him, overwhelming and bittersweet all at once.

“Of course,” Elise said with a smile. “Please, have a seat.”

“Thank you,” Brenda replied politely, setting her plate down before pulling out the chair. Extending her hand toward Elise, she introduced herself. “Brenda Lewis.”

Elise hesitated for the briefest moment, her eyes flickering toward Daniel. She hadn’t forgotten the name he had murmured in his dazed state at the infirmary. Then, with a warm smile, she shook Brenda’s hand. “Nice to meet you. Elise Saunders.”

Brenda turned next to Daniel, extending her hand toward him as well. But he didn’t move.

He simply stared. Frozen.

“Brenda…” he whispered, his voice barely audible.

She smiled politely. “Yes, my name is Brenda. Brenda Lewis.”

Daniel reached out, finally taking her hand. His grip was gentle, lingering longer than it should.

“Nice to meet you,” he said, though the words felt foreign.

Because it wasn’t true.

They had already met. They had already known each other. He wanted to tell her everything—who she was, who he was. He wanted to whisper every memory they had shared, to tell her how much he had missed her, how much he—

Brenda met his gaze, her eyes studying him for a beat too long. For a fleeting moment, Daniel’s heart raced with hope, searching desperately for some spark of recognition in her eyes.

Something. Anything.

But then, with slight hesitation, Brenda gently pulled her hand away.

“May I eat my breakfast?” she asked, her voice light but uncertain.

Reality came crashing down on Daniel.

“I’m sorry,” he said quickly, forcing himself to let go. He tried to ease the awkwardness with a small, apologetic smile.

Elise, sensing the tension, spoke up with warm enthusiasm. “I remember your name,” she said. “You’re new to the academy, aren’t

you?"

Brenda gave a small nod. "Yes. I arrived two days ago."

"Daniel also arrived two days ago," Elise said, glancing toward him. When their eyes met, she gave him a subtle wink. She didn't fully understand what was happening, but she could feel it—something unspoken between them.

Brenda turned to Daniel, curiosity flickering in her expression. "Did they bring you from your home too?"

Daniel forced a bittersweet smile. The past two and a half months flashed through his mind like a reel of film.

For a brief moment, he wondered—could Brenda see the same images running through his head? The endless nights, the narrow escapes, the cold and hunger, the desperate fight to stay alive.

But all he saw in her eyes was simple, innocent curiosity.

Just waiting for an answer.

"I got here after a little adventure," he said, his voice trembling slightly.

Elise smiled gently as she looked between the two of them. "Well, if you're ready, your new adventure begins here."

She beamed. "A brand-new journey for both of you."

Epilogue

“Seeing the future is not what matters,” said Dr. Alden Mercer, addressing the students. He walked toward the sphere in the center of the classroom and touched it lightly. “The future changes every second. What matters is understanding what causes the outcome.”

The blue sphere, standing at the very center of the Visioncraft classroom, glowed faintly and trembled. Seated around the circular table surrounding it, every student listened attentively to Dr. Mercer—except for one.

Daniel Milner.

He couldn’t focus on a single word Dr. Mercer was saying. The torture-filled training sessions in Nivorum, Sylvester’s suffocating pressure, the losses he had endured, Olivia’s return to the old world, and Brenda no longer remembering him—all of it consumed his mind. His gaze remained fixed on the faintly flickering star map on the ceiling.

“Being able to see the future won’t help you change the past, Milner,” Dr. Mercer said. “Please take notes.”